

An Evaluation of *Cutting Edge Digital*

Its Effectiveness in Supporting Contemporary Methodology

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This article looks at the newly introduced digital program of *Cutting Edge Intermediate* which Longman Pearson has produced to complement its hard copy course book. Its primary aim is to examine the extent to which this material supports teachers' use of commonly used classroom techniques and their underlying approaches, and to indicate how it meets the needs of various learning styles. I will provide a brief background to the project before considering the distinctively innovative features of Interactive Whiteboards (IWB) technology in general and the *Cutting Edge Digital* program in particular. I will then look at ways in which the material supports the delivery of a task-based approach to language teaching. I have chosen this focus because the *Cutting Edge* series aims to integrate elements of this approach into its overall methodology. I will also consider the extent to which the program caters to the Multiple Intelligences model of learner differences. In addition, I will attempt to indicate the limitations of the program and offer suggestions for improvements. I will look at the pilot version of the program (Intermediate level—Units 1 to 4). My information is based on the comments of colleagues who have used the material recently and my own impressions of it.

■ Background

Since 2002, the Promethean Interactive Whiteboards (IWBs or IAWs) have gradually been introduced into teaching centres throughout the British Council Network and are now used in approximately 50% of our teaching operations. This has impacted the manner in which teachers wish to interact with published course books and teaching materials. One result of this is that teachers increasingly want to scan course book pages for use on the IWBs and have been requesting permission from publishers to do this so that copyright laws are not broken. Longman Pearson has responded to this need by agreeing to digitalise a proportion of the course books in its *Cutting Edge* series.

In June 2005, Pearson sent a sample of the digitalised material (*Cutting Edge Intermediate Module 3*) to British Council centres in Prague and Hong Kong. The aim was for teachers to review the material and provide feedback to Pearson on its usefulness and shortcomings. The main focus of the review was to be the interaction with Promethean ActivStudio 2 software (AS2), navigation and general functionality. Pearson used the feedback from this project to inform a re-design of their product. The new version (*Cutting Edge Digital modules 1-4*) was trialled in several centres from September 2005, with a view to providing further feedback and suggestions for improvements. The focus during this phase had shifted slightly, to a more critical evaluation of pedagogical issues. Teachers were asked to consider which particular exercises would benefit most from being converted to flipcharts, and this was based on the criteria of

maintaining variety and interest within a lesson. Final, full-length versions of *Cutting Edge Digital* for the pre-intermediate and intermediate levels were created based on this feedback. At the time of writing, these are just becoming available for use in teaching centres throughout the network.

■ What's Innovative about *Cutting Edge Digital*?

Let me begin with a snapshot view of what the digital medium can offer to students, teachers and their classroom practice. The *CED* (*Cutting Edge Digital*) program shares many innovative features with the IWB technology in general. Most immediately it provides what Smith calls the 'wow' factor (Smith, 2001). It can be effective in grabbing the attention of a generation of students which has grown up with the IT medium and is comfortable using it in many aspects of everyday life. These learners may expect such cutting edge technology to be used in the classroom, and see the use of more traditional mediums, such as hard copy course books, as old-fashioned and de-motivating.

In addition, the technology allows the visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning stimuli to be combined and orchestrated for the benefit of different learning styles. For many learners, a strong visual component to a lesson makes the input much easier to understand and remember. The IWBs use of bright, attractive colours which can be moved and manipulated caters well to this learning preference. For students who

learn in more tactile ways, the IWB offers many opportunities for hands-on interaction with the screen. Learners can come to the board and complete interactive tasks such as 'drag and drop', matching exercises or annotation over text. Previously, physical manipulation of learning materials was only possible through the use of traditional methods such as cut-outs, pictures and blutac (The Review Project, 2004) The technology available on the IWB provides a slick, time efficient alternative to this which engages students in a fun way and reduces teacher preparation time. IWBs also allow teachers to integrate the use of multi-media into lessons much more easily and seamlessly than before. They no longer have to cue video tapes or CDs, or even remember to bring them to class! Furthermore, the quality of sound and visual reproduction tends to be better when integrated onto the IWB. Finally, the technology provides teachers with a strong 'front of class' focus. There are always points in a lesson when the teacher needs to direct tasks or keep a class 'together'. At other times, students may be working cooperatively on a task but need reminding of instructions or aims, which can be displayed on the IWB as a constant support for them throughout the activity. This is what Miller et al. (2004:13) call "intervisibility".

While all the above can be said for the *CED* program, it distinguishes itself in the following areas. Teachers have said that it is much simpler and easier to use than the standard IWB technology. It provides audio and visual material in a seamless package that is easy to navigate and is of excellent quality. It is actually a copy of the course book which students have purchased and brought to class with them. By using the 'zoom' function, teachers can focus attention on a small part of a page or an activity ensuring all students are in 'lock-step'. This is far preferable to holding up the book at the front of the class and pointing to a tiny picture. Teachers have consistently commented on how clear, modern and professional the material looks and that it enables visually interesting and impressive presentation of the materials and their instructions. It saves teachers' preparation time because the flip-charts for each lesson are ready made. Furthermore, the ready made flip-charts have a consistent design throughout the body of the material and are generally of a better quality than most teachers could produce.

■ How Does *Cutting Edge Digital Support Classroom Methodology*?

Now that we know the perimeters of what the medium can offer on a technological level, let us move on to a consideration of how this might interface with the theory of language learning. The *Cutting Edge* series places a task-based approach at the centre of its methodology. Let us take a brief look at what this consists of and the thinking which underpins it.

The approach has been influenced by second language acquisition (SLA) research which suggests that formal 'grammar focused' lessons do not chime well with the natural cognitive learning processes of most students

(Richards & Rogers, 2001: 223). Task work is seen as a highly effective stimulus for the learning process and is the central focus point of the approach. What do we mean by 'task'? There are countless definitions, but I will cite two here for their simplicity and clarity. Skehan (1996), quoted in Ellis (2003:4) defines a task as an "activity in which: meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome". A similar definition is provided by Bygate, Skehan, & Swain (2001), also quoted in Ellis (2003:5): "A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective". The essence of this is that the main purpose of language is to express meaning. Learners acquire language most effectively when they are focused on expressing themselves meaningfully to achieve a particular outcome. Meaningful expression does not necessarily have to be cloaked in accurate form. Engaging learners in tasks provides rich opportunities for purposeful, interactive language transactions which facilitate the above.

A typical task will consist of several stages (Willis, 1996 cited in Richards & Rogers, 2001: 238-240). There is normally a pre-task activity during which learners 'tune-in' to the topic and aims of the task. This could involve some sort of brainstorming or personalisation exercise, for example. Students then complete the actual task, usually in pairs or small groups, while the teacher monitors and supports the discussion. The emphasis is always on fluency and meaningful communication rather than on accuracy of form. There might then be some sort of reflection stage in which learners evaluate what happened and what was achieved. They may report this briefly to the class and compare outcomes. Finally, there might be a stage where students complete language-focused tasks or practice exercises related to the themes and texts of the main activity. As they communicate with each other learners may have to process and produce language which they lack the linguistic resources for (Richards & Rogers, 2001: 235). This is thought to support the learning process by developing creativity in manipulating the language along with a willingness to experiment with its use.

The teacher's role is to choose the tasks to be completed and to order them into an instructional sequence appropriate to the needs of the learners. Teachers must also prepare students for tasks by providing topic warmers, clear instructions and demonstrations of how the activity should proceed. They should also help learners to 'focus on form', that is, to 'notice' salient characteristics of the language they use. This can be done with the support of such things as parallel tasks or text exploration (Richards & Rogers 2001: 236).

The success of most tasks depends heavily on the quality and variety of materials used to execute them. So, let us now consider how effectively *CED* supports the task-based approach along with the preparation and delivery of classroom activities and materials.

Firstly, the program supports the teacher in the

preparation of task materials. With regular IWB technology, teachers are often left to create their own flipcharts from scratch. This can be time consuming and can, depending on the skill of the teacher, result in a screen page which looks cluttered and over filled with colour. *CED* has ready made flipcharts which are simple, clear, and attractive. Teachers can display complete pages of the course book on the board. Sections with interactive flipcharts embedded in them are discretely highlighted with a blue circle. The teacher can use the zoom function to enlarge these to full screen. They then click on the flipchart icon to access the interactive task. As well as saving on preparation time, this function makes 'toggling' between screen pages a quick and seamless procedure, something which is not always true for the Promethean technology.

Secondly, *CED* can be used to present new language and facilitate a '*focus on form*', an important component of the task-based approach. The target language can be made clearer and more engaging by enlarging an 'Analysis' box as a stimulus for group discussion. Individual students can then approach the board to match, underline or complete the gaps as required, under guidance from their classmates. Reading texts can be enlarged to allow teachers to focus on reading sub-skills such as skimming and scanning or inferring the meaning of unknown words from context. Teachers can use the enlarged text to demonstrate the 'process' of writing by highlighting such things as topic sentences, referencing techniques or linking devices.

Thirdly, the program can help the teacher in the '*pre-task*' stage of a lesson. Questions or pictures for discussion topics can be enlarged to provide a stimulus for personalisation or a visual warmer. Instructions for tasks can be displayed on the large screen to be discussed in whole class mode before an activity begins. The teacher can walk the students through the stages of the task and model or demonstrate as necessary. The instructions can then remain visible at the front of the room throughout the activity as a clear visual prompt for students who need this support. During execution of the *main task* we should note the program's potential for engaging and motivating students. Both Beeland (2002) and Miller et al. (2004) have commented on this aspect of the IWB technology. Miller et al. (2004:8), for example, says its use "promotes pupil interest and more sustained concentration, and leads to more effective learning."

For tasks to run smoothly the teacher must make use of a variety of *classroom management* techniques. *CED* helps here in several ways. The teacher can enlarge and limit what is to be discussed, thus supporting students with weak concentration or self-discipline. The enlargement provides visual recognition of where the class is in the book and can reduce teacher talking time as it negates the necessity of saying 'open your books to page 17' five times (sometimes students just don't seem to hear it!). It is a clear copy of the book so it is easy for students to find and follow activities. It provides a strong, central whole class focus when needed, as for example in a presentation or feedback stage of a lesson. It can help to vary the pace of a lesson by changing the style of

delivery and patterns of interaction between teacher and students.

Additionally, the program can support the '*report*' and '*posttask*' stages of the task cycle (Willis, 1996, cited in Richards & Rogers, 2001: 239-240). This is achieved through such features as the drop down tape scripts and the 'check' answer icons. After a listening the tape script can be called up so that the teacher can highlight selected language features such as functional exponents or pronunciation difficulties. The screen can be annotated with colour pen and specific sections of a recording can be replayed for more intensive modelling and drilling (the counter indicator on the play icon makes this extremely easy to do). All of these things can be done by the teacher, but students may also be nominated to approach the board and take over the teacher's role under guidance from their peers.

Finally, the program allows tasks to be easily *reviewed* and *previewed*. A few clicks can call up a page of material or a particular exercise covered in a previous lesson for re-cap, extension or for the setting up of a parallel activity. It is easy to enlarge the 'overview' section at the beginning of each module to show students where they are in the unit—what has been covered and what is to come.

Although the *Cutting Edge* series does not explicitly defer to the Multiple Intelligences (MI) model of language learning, it is notable that *CED* actually supports some aspects of it quite successfully. The MI movement is founded on the ideas of Howard Gardner (1993, cited in Richards and Rogers, 2001:15). It believes that people possess several 'types' of intelligence but that individuals differ in their propensities towards these different types. Growth of these intelligence types can be promoted in all individuals through training and practice. Students, therefore, have individual "learning styles, preferences, or intelligences" which the language learning process must cater to (Richards & Rogers, 2001: 115).

Gardner (1993, cited in Richards & Rogers, 2001: 116) identified eight types of intelligence: *Linguistic* (the ability to use language), *Logical/Mathematical* (the ability to think rationally), *Spatial* (the ability to form mental models of the world), *Musical* (possession of a good ear for music), *Bodily/Kinaesthetic* (possession of a well-coordinated body), *Interpersonal* (the ability to work well with people), *Intrapersonal* (the ability to understand oneself and to be happy and well-adjusted), and *Naturalist* (the ability to understand patterns of nature).

The *CED* program caters well to the needs of individuals with *kinaesthetic* intelligence. These learners benefit from being able to get out of their seats to touch the whiteboard and manipulate the program themselves. Beeland (2002) reports how motivating this can be for students. One says, "I get into learning when it's hands-on" (Beeland, 2002:4). A student in control of the whiteboard may also be utilizing their *interpersonal* intelligence as they rely on negotiation with peers to complete a gap-fill or matching task. Miller et al. (2004:20) note how much social interaction can be generated within a class when a student is working at the whiteboard, and how this enhances collaborative

work. This connects to the *linguistic* intelligence, as students are required to articulate their ideas about the target language for successful completion of the whiteboard task; what Miller et al. (2004:19) call “verbalising”. By explaining and directing from the whiteboard, students ‘verbalise’ their learning and this supports conceptual development. *Spatial* learners are also well served by the program’s use of colour, animation and video.

■ What Are the Shortcomings of Cutting Edge Digital?

In terms of methodology, the most striking limitation of the program is that it does not support a variety of *interaction* patterns. This is a crucial omission as research has suggested it is essential for learners to have access to these interaction patterns for successful language acquisition to occur (Ellis, 2003:69). Carter & Nunan (2001) have summarized the key studies in this area. They point out that when learners work in pairs or small groups they are more likely to use a variety of language, participate in negotiation of meaning, and assume proactive roles than in ‘teacher-fronted’ interactions, in which the lesson proceeds in a lock-step manner.

CED offers interactive devices which are restricted to ‘drop and drag’, matching, hide and reveal and annotations on text, a repertoire that could become repetitive and predictable over time. Unfortunately, the primary mode of interaction remains teacher to students. This can lead to lessons that are too teacher centred. The whiteboard allows a front of class display of all that is in the course book. While this can be advantageous at times, it could foster in students a passive dependency on the teacher’s direction and control of the lesson. Learners may be distracted from participating in autonomous communicative activities if they feel they are constantly beholden to the electronic ‘big brother’ at the front of the classroom. It is true that we have the option of allowing students to manipulate the board under direction from peers or the teacher. This can be a powerful tool but, having said that, we seem to have come to the end of what is quite a short list of ways in which *CED* supports classroom interaction. We have noted how useful the program is in helping a teacher to set up tasks and provide feedback, but for interactions which might occur in the middle of a task or activity its application is limited. It can remind students of instructions and task stages but does not augment interaction patterns in ways more substantial than this.

It is easy to get carried away with the novelty value of the technology and overlook the fact that it may not cater to the *learning styles* of all students. By ‘learning style’ we mean any individual’s preferred methods of engaging in the learning process (Nunan, 1991: 168). Research suggests that accommodating learning styles and preferences in the classroom leads to more successful language acquisition (Willing, 1988 cited in Nunan, 1991: 167). Willing identified four basic types of learner: *Concrete learners* (who tend to like games, pictures, video,

pair work and enjoy practising the target language outside the classroom), *Analytical learners* (who like studying grammar, books and newspapers, studying alone, finding their own mistakes and working on teacher assigned problems), *Communicative learners* (who like to learn through conversations with friends and native speakers, and enjoy using the language outside the classroom), *Authority-oriented learners* (who prefer the teacher to explain everything, to have their own textbook, to write everything down, to study grammar, and to learn by reading and seeing new words).

While this provides just one categorization of learner styles, it serves to show the spectrum of what we might be dealing with in any given classroom situation and underlines the need for teachers to “provide a range of learning options and activities in class” (Nunan, 1991: 170). *CED* might appeal to the *authority-oriented* learner in its tendency to place the teacher at the centre of the classroom experience. It might also cater to the visual and aural propensities of *concrete* learners. However, *communicative* learners may be less satisfied with the constrictions the program places on interaction with peers and cooperative task completion. We should not forget the MI model of learning styles and must bear in mind that while many students (perhaps younger ones) may be attracted to the visual and kinaesthetic qualities of *CED*, there may be others whose age or background precludes this. Not everybody feels comfortable with learning through electronic media. Beeland (2004:4) cites one student who expressed frustration with the IWB technology in this respect: “I was brought up learning from books, so it’s going to take some getting used to.”. Many people may prefer the comfort and familiarity of paper, pen or realia and we should not forget that in different ways, these materials also meet the needs of visual and tactile learners.

Another shortcoming of *CED* is the restricted and inflexible nature of its *content*. It is restricted in the sense that what we see on the whiteboard is simply a pedestrian copy of the book. The program does not take us beyond this and we are left with the feeling that an excellent opportunity for providing a rich body of alternative, supplementary materials has been lost. Adding to this frustration is the fact that the content we do have is relatively fixed and incapable of being used flexibly. This can be a serious handicap for any language learning material, digital or otherwise. Many teachers, especially experienced ones, value materials which give them choices about what they use in the classroom. This involves the ability to select content, play around with the order in which it is presented, and adapt it to meet the needs and preferences of their learners. Bell & Gower (1998: 122) make flexibility the first item on their list of key principles for materials creation: “We wanted an activity sequence that worked pedagogically” and “it was important that teachers should feel they could move activities around, cut them out or supplement them according to need”. Tomlinson (2003: 101) has also placed flexibility at the heart of the materials design process: “flexibility should be one of the main aims when

developing frameworks for evaluation and adaptation and its achievement should ensure principled connections between materials, target learners and specific environments of learning”.

Whilst teachers can select the sections needed for a lesson, they cannot edit or supplement them within the program itself. This must be done externally through the use of standard IWB technology or hard copies. There are no links to the internet or self-study materials, no supplementary vocabulary tasks, no links to the resource, work or video books. Written annotations by students or the teacher disappear when switching to another page and cannot be saved. All these features are limiting and restrict the adaptability of the content.

■ Suggestions for Improvements

I think that, to a certain extent, we must accept that the program’s role in supporting *interaction* patterns is limited to the areas previously outlined. Yes, it is a useful aid for setting up tasks, displaying instructions and facilitating feedback. But its strength here lies in teachers’ judicious use of it for these purposes. To avoid creating lessons which are too ‘whiteboard-fronted’, teachers must ensure they exploit the medium with discretion and avoid the temptation to overuse it just because ‘it’s there’. They must remember to use it as a supportive tool for points in the lesson when a central focus is required, but be prepared to intersperse it with a variety of other techniques, approaches and materials. In support of this, it is essential that teachers receive sufficient guidance in using the program appropriately. It would be useful if Pearson produced teacher training materials to accompany the package. This could familiarize teachers with the technicalities of operating the program, as well as provide input on how to use it effectively to support their lesson preparation and use of classroom methodology.

A similar point can be made about *CED*’s relationship with varying learner styles and ‘intelligences’. We have noted how it can cater to some aspects of these, but once again much of its impact lies in the teacher’s ability to use it (or not) with judgement and restraint. A training package for the teacher could also provide support in this area. On a technical level, the program could include more features which play to preferred styles of learning. For example, there could be more features to click on and get a response to hold the attention of kinaesthetic learners. There could be an icon which activates background music to meet the needs of auditory learners. Pronunciation work could be made more ‘visual’ by having karaoke style ‘bouncing balls’ which move across a tape script to highlight aspects of pace, rhythm or stress. Text could appear on the screen in a variety of ways. For example, it could slowly fade or bounce onto the screen as can happen in Power Point. More thought could be given to the appearance and layout of the screen shots. They are currently very cluttered and there is often too much text on the page. This can result in information overload and be baffling for some students. It would be easy to remove the book title, level and page numbers;

they are not needed on every screen. A lot of the instructions for activities could be removed or hidden in a drop down menu, and the number of ‘check’ buttons could be reduced by allowing answers to be accessed with a right click on the target item, or by using one button which reveals answers in order when clicked repeatedly, as in Power Point.

As far as *content* is concerned, it would be useful to have digital material which supplements the core material in a tangential way, providing tasks which support, extend and develop what already exists in hard copy. For example, there could be a focus on writing skills along with a facility for students to save their own work in some kind of students’ work folder. This could be accessed through hyperlinks on existing *CED* pages when appropriate. This would allow the teacher to give input on various aspects of the writing skill as well as display students’ work for class analysis and discussion. At the moment, this can be done if standard whiteboard technology is used in conjunction with the *CED* program, but not if the program is used on its own. There could also be more explicit work on the reading skill, such as a built-in function for automatically highlighting certain features of coherence and cohesion or forward and back referencing. For example, the teacher should be able to highlight all pronouns by linking devices within a text with a click of the mouse or pen. Games such as ‘Hangman’ or ‘Word Search’ could be introduced to enrich the delivery of vocabulary development and inject an extra element of fun. There could also be class mazes or murder mystery style activities which encourage students to work collaboratively or competitively in whole class, pair or group mode.

The program might benefit from having more video content which is better integrated and again different from what the hard copy video component offers. The program could also be more adaptable. Currently, the content is prescribed and rigidly fixed. Teachers might appreciate being able to adapt and save the interactive flipcharts or link them to their own versions. Perhaps there could be sections built into the program which allow teachers (or students) to author materials using ready made ‘building blocks’. These can then be linked easily to the pages of the digital course book.

■ Conclusion

The *CED* program is an exciting new classroom tool. It allows teachers to display copies of the course book pages on the IWB to enhance the impact of their lessons. The material is simple and easy to use. It looks professional and attractive, and can help to raise levels of engagement and motivation. This is especially true for learners with visual and kinaesthetic learning styles. It can inject an element of fun and novelty into a lesson and make learning more memorable.

The publishers make no claims for it to be anything more than a copy of the book. However, this raises the question: ‘Why couldn’t it be more?’ I have noted the limitations of the content and tried to suggest where this

could be developed in richer, more imaginative ways. It is true that throughout the program's trial and feedback stages there has been an attempt by Pearson to establish how well the material supports the delivery of effective and interesting lessons. However, I cannot help feeling that the primary concerns informing the production of *CED* were commercial rather than methodological ones.

As teachers move forward with this technology and begin to use it more extensively, they must ensure that they do not become slaves to it. It may be all too easy for teachers to use this new tool unthinkingly and without much consideration for whether it is needed to support

their methodology or approach during a lesson. Miller et al. (2004:16) have highlighted this potential pitfall: "It is clear from our observations and discussions that it is still quality teaching that ensures progress; the IAW alone does not guarantee it." Finally, as Walker (2002:3) points out, we should bear in mind that although this technology is new and exciting today, there may soon come a time when it becomes 'old hat'; when 'wow!' becomes 'yawn'. When this happens it is vital that teachers still remember how to capture the hearts and minds of their students in alternative ways, and can continue to deliver lessons with impact and effectiveness.

NOTES

Since the completion of this article, the final, full-length version of *CED* for pre-intermediate and intermediate levels has been introduced into schools throughout the British Council network. It is encouraging to see that Pearson has responded to some of the criticisms raised during the pilot stage, notably by making it possible for teachers to customise materials more easily. It is now possible to import pictures, change names and save the flipcharts for use in a subsequent class. Annotations can also be saved.

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