

languages ICT



What are online notice boards in MFL?

Web-based notice boards offer many of the advantages of email to the foreign language learner, such as the opportunity to compose text off-line, spend time looking up vocabulary and add separate files as attachments. They also offer students the possibility to communicate easily with a larger number of individuals simultaneously, therefore opening up the classroom for online discussions.



Notice boards (also called forums or pinboards) come in several shapes and sizes, but they all cover the same basics, namely messages left online for others to read and respond to. Some notice boards form part of a full Virtual Learning Environment (including text messaging and chat, such as Yahoo! Groups), others, particularly those put in place by children's magazines, concentrate on the text alone.



When it comes to layout, notice boards tend to do one of two things. They either display a list of messages under title headings - very much like a list of emails in an Inbox - or 'strand' them. This means that messages belonging to the same strand of conversation are stored together, with responses indented under the original message. If a choice is available, the indented - 'stranded' - version will be much more accessible for foreign language learners, particularly for students with special needs, as the direction of the conversation is much more easily identifiable.

Public notice boards usually focus on a particular topic ('My dream job', 'My favourite book', etc.), making them useful for accessing authentic language within a structured environment. To use one, students need to access the website carrying the notice board. Examples are www.geo.de/GEOLino/community/pinboards/ and www.momes.net/ (click on Correspondants, then Forum). They will then have the opportunity to read what other people have written about the topic, before taking the chance to reply to a message or begin a new topic themselves. They can then return at a later time to find out if their 'post' - their message - has sparked any responses. It can be a great motivator to read authentic text which is a direct result from their own writing.

Thanks to a number of free programmes available on the Internet, it is now possible for anyone to create their own notice board. Teachers may choose to create a notice board for students to maintain communication over a holiday period, to display and discuss work or to collaborate on a project, for example. Without any technical knowledge, programmes such as [YahooGroups!](http://groups.yahoo.com/) (<http://groups.yahoo.com/>) allow even novices to set up a notice board which is open upon invitation only, making it as secure as possible.

Hints and tips:

- **Safety:** Not all notice boards are policed by an editor, but some are. A bit of legwork (reading user policies, information for parents, etc.) on the site will quickly show how well the site is maintained. If not, you can send an email to the site co-ordinator or webmaster to find out details. As with all Internet-based communication, students should be discouraged from using their real names or revealing too much information. Please see the [Becta Schools section on Internet safety](http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=is&catcode=ss_to_es_pp_aup_03&rid=11087) (http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=is&catcode=ss_to_es_pp_aup_03&rid=11087) for further information.
- **Access:** Because notice boards are classified as a form of communication, some schools may automatically ban access. If this is the case, once the site has been declared 'safe', the school IT technician will be able to re-programme the access specifications so the site in question may be used.
- **Language:** The language used on notice boards mirrors the current linguistic level of its users. Whilst a monitored notice board will not feature inappropriate language, your students are likely to encounter erroneous spelling and 'txt' type language from native speakers of the target language. Students may need guidance on how to 'interpret' such language and be alerted to the fact that not everything they read will be linguistically correct.

- Where you have set up a notice board with a teacher and class abroad, you need to agree with students when it is appropriate to use their mother tongue and when they should try to use the target language. You can specify that certain strands of conversation should proceed in a given language, for example. Alternatively, conversation could be bilingual, with the proviso that everyone writes what they can in the target language and adds anything else they want to say in their mother tongue.
- Participation: Agree with students what acceptable participation would be - one post per week over a longer period, maybe more if it is a short, intensive project. If possible, structure participation so that students can write something in the target language and specify clearly how much a post is 'worth.' You can do this by giving a list of examples, ranging from a well thought-out post in both languages (which furthers discussion by asking questions and drawing other members in), right down to a simple salutation. As well as providing a framework for teacher monitoring, students will thus be better able to assess their own participation. Translation engines (online services that automatically translate text) may be useful to students in understanding other members' contributions, but not for actual text production.

To read about tried and tested ideas for using online notice boards, try searching the Useful ICT ideas, effective language lessons database on the Languages ICT website.

Note: Information in this booklet has been collated by a number of practising teachers and advisers and is accurate to the best of our knowledge at the time of writing. CILT and ALL do not take any responsibility for inaccuracies contained within. The inclusion of any software products and/or companies within Languages ICT guidance does not imply endorsement by CILT or ALL in any way.