

5.

Link with Brittany

Schools Involved:

Montgomery Combined School, Exeter, Devon
Ecole Sanquer, Brest, Brittany, France

Background: Montgomery Combined School is a large urban school (600 children) that educates children from the ages of 4 to 12. The children come from a wide range of backgrounds, though the cultural mix is limited. We are very fortunate in having a specialist modern foreign language teacher who teaches children French from Year 4. Our links with Ecole Sanquer were established in 2000, through visiting the school during our trip to Brittany with Year 7.

Curriculum Context: Key Stage 2 and 3 Modern Foreign Languages

Aims of the Video Conferencing Sessions

The primary aim for linking with a school in France was to improve motivation for learning French. We hoped that real-time conversations with French children would provide a context for learning where the children were able to put into practice what they had learnt in the classroom. In addition, children would be able to discover for themselves the cultural differences between France and England. It is also an excellent way of satisfying the National Curriculum requirement for 'using ICT to support learning' as opposed to learning to use ICT. The video conferencing system is very simple to use and provides no barriers to the children. Our school undertakes a yearly visit with our Year 7s to Brittany, part of which includes a visit to Ecole Sanquer. We felt that prior contact with the class they were to spend a day with would increase the productivity of this experience, as initial nervousness would be reduced. We felt that children who had already encountered their peers through conferencing would be more curious to meet in person. At the very least, the children would be familiar to each other. Perhaps the most important aim was to provide the children with a real audience for their learning, as opposed to conversing in French with native English speakers, where the point of conversing in a foreign language appears spurious.

Planning, Research and Preparation

Initial preparation involved getting a video conferencing unit into the school in France and establishing an ISDN connection. The French school had an ASDL line, whose capacity is greater than that of an ISDN line. This created compatibility problems, which could only be resolved by the installation of an ISDN line. This was overseen by Tim Arnold, Media Advisor for Devon Curriculum Services. Our contact with the Ecole Sanquer took four different forms, and it seems useful now to talk about them individually, as different issues arose as a result of each. Our original plan was to make a daily link between small groups of pupils. The other activities evolved as a result of conversations between staff from both schools.

The Video Conferences

Project 1: DAILY CONVERSATION

This has been the mainstay of the work that we have done using the video conference system. Essentially, it involves two children from each school asking each other questions and producing a fact file on each other.

The sessions were set up in a classroom, which necessitated them being undertaken during the last half hour of the lunch break. As a result of the extended French break for lunch, the time difference was not a problem.

Planning implications were minimal. The questions that the English children needed to ask in order to compile the fact file had already been covered as part of the normal Year 7 course. (We use *Equipe* Book 1.) This was a deliberate choice on our part as we did not want to overload an already busy curriculum with extra work. The content for the sessions was discussed over the link and agreed in a few minutes.

At Montgomery we set it up so that two Year 7 children conference whilst two observe in preparation for the following day. In France, there are no children observing. Each school generally has a member of staff to assist the children, though it proves just as viable to have a single member of staff supervising. It is vital, however, that there is at least one French-speaking member of staff.

The children talk for about 20 minutes each session and ask questions to discover information such as name, age, date of birth, family, pets, etc. The teacher present translates additional questions that the children wish to ask. Children are given a recording sheet to enter details of the interviewee. This also serves as useful prompt.

We were initially concerned about the language protocol. This appears to have resolved itself, with children finding their natural level and asking and responding in whichever language they feel able to. Our students tend to use French more, as they have been learning it for much longer than the French children have been learning English.

Technical Issues and Other Problems

We found that a larger television was far easier to use than a small one. This was purchased specifically for this project.

A potential problem was that during wet lunch times, the classroom would be needed to accommodate pupils. However, since it is a Year 7 classroom and it is they who have undertaken most of the conferencing, they understand how important it is that the sessions remain undisturbed and voluntarily seek alternative arrangements. We have, therefore, not experienced any difficulties, apart from occasional blips in the system, that have stopped us from making contact. These have been very rare.

Evaluation of Learning Outcomes

Thanks to the video conferencing system, young pupils in both schools communicate every day in the foreign language. Every conference is different. All are highly beneficial. The linguistic gains are largely self-evident. After years of disembodied voices emerging from cassette recorders, devoid of interest, context and any of the para-linguistic clues which aid understanding, now they have 'real' children who laugh and wave, look nervous and stumble the same as themselves. Suddenly there is a reason to communicate.

All the children are volunteers, dying to have a turn. There are also many willing 'veterans' often the most unexpected children, hovering in the background ready to answer questions and give advice during the moments before their classmates have their first link. In this way, extra relevant vocabulary is introduced naturally, in context, passed from one pupil to another and applied immediately. Pupils have developed a great sense of ownership of the project and teachers, although present, are increasingly redundant!

At Montgomery we have a regular study visit to France but there are always more applicants than there are places available. Some children lack the confidence, many are unable to come for financial reasons, others are prevented by anxious parents or cultural prejudice (often centring on food and toilets!). Video conferencing enables these children, whilst remaining in a familiar environment, to have first-hand contact with their peers across the Channel and gives them an opportunity to view things from another perspective.

We knew that the sustainability of the project depended on our producing an activity which was low in teacher preparation and high in pupil involvement. We chose the interview format as it was an end-of-unit task from our course book (*Equipe Book 1, Unit 1*) which ties in exactly with previous learning for both schools. Since in most MFL classes the questioning role is largely assumed by the teacher, the interview format provides valuable additional practice in an often neglected area.

An additional local benefit for Montgomery pupils is that it anticipates entirely the Exeter School Year 7/8 French Bridging Assignment (part of the Exeter Curriculum Agreement), an interview based task designed to aid transition to High School. By borrowing time from the lunch-hour it increases the amount of time spent on French in a school day.

Initially there was a huge disparity in the language skills of the two groups. The French children are two years younger and only began English in September 2001. The early links were mostly in French and tended to be shorter. Since then, confidence and competence have grown. Many children have linked several times with different partners. There is now more English spoken and links not only last longer, but are also more fluent.

Many cultural differences have been identified by the children themselves, who freely ask each other for information (when necessary in their own language). Issues such as school uniform, the school day, Saturday morning school, school dinners and homework have all been repeatedly explored by the constantly changing partnerships. Debate has often continued long after the link is over.

The linguistic ability of the pupils is never a bar to conferencing. Although a preparation sheet is available, many choose not to use it, preferring instead to write their own questions on a sheet of A4 paper. Some prefer to do the whole conference without written notes. Our initial intention was to use the preparation sheet as a confidence prop and a basis for follow-up written activities. But to avoid deterring reluctant writers, who more than most need to experience success from the link, the preparation sheet has remained a 'linguistic security blanket'. For similar reasons there is no formal follow-up in class.

A significant indicator of the success of the project has been the changing attitudes of the pupils. Many are very vocal in their enthusiasm immediately after a link. With others, significantly reluctant and less confident boys, there is no verbal feedback. Often it is just increased eye-contact with the teacher and a more relaxed demeanour in class, following a link, that indicate their growing confidence and interest in modern language learning.

Ideas for Potential Development

In April 2002 the class from Ecole Sanquer are joining our Year 5 pupils on their annual residential trip on Dartmoor. The classes have already 'met' via the link and sent Christmas cards and other correspondence. We hope to use the video conferencing system when the French class spends a day in school with our Year 7 to report back to their friends in Brest. In May 2002, Year 7 pupils from Montgomery will spend a day at Ecole Sanquer during their five-day study visit to Brittany and will do the same. Our Head of First School, also a French speaker, will be accompanying the trip to meet her counterpart in Brest, with a view to extending the project to younger pupils.

Project 2: SHARING CLASS LESSONS

This has not formed such a regular part of our use of the video conferencing system, but has been informative for both children and teaching staff. Three lessons have been observed; two French lessons at Montgomery and one English lesson at Ecole Sanquer. In each case both classes were present with their respective teachers.

Additional aims: From the pupils' perspective, the idea was to show that learning a foreign language is equally hard, no matter what nationality you are. Again, the idea was to enhance motivation and introduce a small element of competition into their learning. With regard to the teachers, the aim was to learn from each other's teaching styles.

Details of Sessions

The lessons went ahead as they normally would. The host class used the observing class to demonstrate pronunciation and correct sentence structure. There was some element of participation but this was limited to when it actually had utility.

The English lesson observed involved Philippe Le Bian teaching his class the names of animals and where they lived. The class at Montgomery were asked to model answers, which the French children then copied. The lesson lasted about 40 minutes and was enjoyed by all.

Technical Issues

These centred on the loss of clarity of picture and sound when there is any movement. As all the lessons were fairly dynamic, this was a significant problem. Additionally, the use of visual aids, particularly when these were not static, proved ineffective for the observing class. For example, Philippe Le Bian used pictures of animals to show what he was talking about. He held these at the front of the class and moved around a fair bit. As the camera was at the back of the room, we had to zoom in to see what animal he was holding up. As soon as he moved, the picture became very pixilated and disappeared in a blur. The problem was not severe enough to detract from the enjoyment of the lesson; it added another dimension. Static visual aids such as overhead projectors would, however, have been preferable.

Project 3: THE VIRTUAL TOUR

Each class made a videotaped tour of their school, complete with commentary. These were shown through the video conferencing link and were followed by a question and answer session.

Aims: Again, the main thrust of these two sessions was to highlight cultural differences and similarities. The idea: to engender curiosity and thereby enhance motivation for learning.

Planning, Research and Preparation

Apart from the actual making of the video, little preparation was required for these two sessions, apart from arranging the day and time for the link-up.

The making of the video involved a fair amount of time and input. Children and a teaching assistant were instructed on the use of the camera and given advice on how best to shoot the film. They then created a storyboard of what shots to take where and an idea of commentary. The children then went out for an afternoon and shot about 15 minutes of film, which was viewed, unedited. The whole project probably took up about one day for the children and teaching assistant, plus about an hour of our media advisor's time to instruct the different parties.

Technical Issues

No technical problems were experienced apart from me being unable to stick colour-coded cables in the colour-coded holes correctly (doh!).

With the video, as with 'live' conferencing, any movement creates distortion when played back. This can be minimised by the use of a tripod and by exercising a preference for static shots and slow pans as opposed to charging up and down corridors at top speed to film the whole school in one continuous take in 15 seconds flat!

Learning Outcomes

A few children got the opportunity to develop filming skills, and some, acting skills. Both classes got an insight into another culture, which stimulated a lot of curiosity about school life in general. The conversation flowed very freely and there were lots of eager questioners on both sides.

Project 4: EUROVISION KARAOKE

This was a bit of fun devised by Philippe. He e-mailed me two songs, one in French and one English, and we sang them together.

Aims: The children had pronunciation modelled. They used new vocabulary. It was safe learning.

Planning, Research and Preparation

Philippe had taught his class the songs, typed out the lyrics and e-mailed them to us. All I had to do was photocopy them for the children and run through meaning and pronunciation before the link.

Details of the Session

Our class read through the lyrics and I translated what they meant. We worked a little on pronunciation, but couldn't really rehearse, as I had no idea of the tune. When we linked, Philippe's class modelled the song and then he ran through it line by line with my class. We then sang it together. The song was perfect as each was repeated at least once; it had a lively tune and was good fun to sing.

Evaluation of Learning Outcomes

It was really good fun for the children and hence motivating. New words were quickly incorporated into their vocabulary because there was a real and identifiable need. Pronunciation was clearly modelled, so there was plenty of scope for self-correction.

Ideas for Potential Development

The daily sessions will continue for as long as we are able to keep the video conferencing system and fund the ISDN and associated call charges. As the children's vocabulary increases, the sessions will increase in breadth and depth. We are intending to shift the focus of the sessions to mirror our weather data-collection project, which forms part of the Year 7 geography curriculum. It would be interesting to keep a parallel log so that direct comparisons can be made between our weather and theirs.

Further in the future, we would like video conferencing to form an integral part of every French lesson. This would require: a) a room to be set aside for the video conferencing system b) the employment of a teaching assistant to supervise the children and c) sufficient funding to pay for the running costs. Whilst this may seem pie in the sky, the benefits to children, not only in French, but in other areas of the curriculum (through increased confidence, motivation, cultural awareness, awareness of place in the 'grand scheme of things' and nitty-gritty issues like grammatical structure of language) may well prove to be worth the investment.

IN SUMMARY

These projects have been a huge success. This is mainly due to the willingness of everyone involved to make it happen. Philippe has been incredibly enthusiastic and has given up much of his time to ensure that the project works. The change that we have seen in many of our less motivated children has been astonishing. Irrespective of the improvement in their French, we have seen an increase in their confidence and motivation across the board.

Trina Ferguson and Jon Meyer, Montgomery Combined School

THE FRENCH PERSPECTIVE

Video conferencing is very good news for language teachers. Put simply, when children use video conferencing they discover language. It suddenly makes sense! They can see for themselves that what they have learned has meaning. They recognise that if they want to communicate they need another language and they learn that when they use their knowledge they can indeed communicate.

Until now, French pupils have had to discover the British, their language and culture at second hand, through books and video cassettes. Now they can talk with children their own age face to face, asking questions and exchanging information. There is no gap anymore. Communication is direct and spontaneous.

Since the start of the project, my pupils have become more involved in their language learning because, thanks to our lunch-time conferences, they know they have the chance to use it. My initial concerns over a lack of vocabulary have proved unnecessary. Children ask when they need information. Even those who learn German are keen to participate and do so with the help of their peers on both sides of the Channel.

There have been unforeseen benefits too. The children from my school acted as ballboys and girls at a recent international tennis tournament, held in Brest. They met some of the players and I was pleased to see them asking for names and autographs in English. There was no hesitation, the fear of speaking had gone and I am sure that this is due to the frequency of our contacts.

As well as conferencing every lunchtime, we have 'dropped in' on each other's school day. Our friends from Montgomery watched me teach my class an English lesson about pets. I built in an

information gap activity, deliberately withholding some key vocabulary. My children, using flashcards, then had to 'ask the audience' in England for information in order to complete the task.

We then watched a class from Montgomery learning French. It was very interesting for both pupil and teacher to compare learning styles and in particular to see the audio, visual and kinesthetic methods being used in the English classroom. We are not used to so much moving about.

Pupils with special needs have been fully involved in the project. They have had great success and enjoyment and have gained a lot of confidence from the experience. Video conferencing has had an impact on other areas of the curriculum too. For my pupils, it proved a useful tool in learning their own language when they decided to produce a video presentation of 'a day in the life of a pupil at l'Ecole Sanquer'. This of course entailed the use of many skills. They worked together to plan and write commentaries choosing their grammar and vocabulary with their audience in mind. They then had to learn to operate the camera and to schedule and organise the recording. It was fun for them to compare their own school day with that of their friends when they then watched a similar recording broadcast from England.

We have had great fun singing together too. When English children were learning about food, I found a song about breakfast in France which had lots of repetition. I e-mailed the words to England and we sang it together one afternoon. On another occasion my class learned to sing about 'Cockles and Mussels' and joined Montgomery singing in French about life at school.

The two schools are meeting at the end of April, for a joint residential at a centre on Dartmoor and again in June when the children from Montgomery come to France. Video conferencing has greatly increased the anticipation and excitement and enabled the children to get to know each other beforehand.

This project has generated a lot of interest in France both in the media and in education. We have had journalists from national newspaper and radio to watch several of our daily conferences. Local and regional advisors have also visited and they immediately saw the potential for linking small rural schools in France. We need more information about the cost of buying and running the equipment.

We have never experienced technical problems linking for a conference; in fact it is so easy that the children now do it themselves. I had no knowledge of video conferencing before but now I find it hard to plan without thinking about it. We could show children aspects of everyday life around the world, compare civilisations, religions and culture. geography lessons would change completely. Video conferencing equipment in museums and art-galleries would give children the chance to visit during a lesson! For the future, I feel the potential of video conferencing is enormous.

Philippe le Bian, Headteacher, Ecole Sanquer, Brittany, France