

## Novel Idea

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**Abstract** This article reports on the 'Novel Idea' eTwinning project between a group of Scottish and French primary school children respectively, aged ten to eleven, incorporating Modern Foreign Language Education, International Education and Citizenship. The Novel Idea project enabled the pupils of the two classes to co-write a book and to use their knowledge of each other's language to explore ideas and exchange best practice. ICT and literacy came to the fore and the children were able to take autonomy to be creative, innovative and imaginative. Children also learned to use new ICT technologies: web conferencing to communicate with each other and stop motion animation to practise their French. A blog further aided communication, enabling the pupils to post their chapters, illustrations and to leave comments. The project has continued for three years and at the end of each academic session the relevant student groups have completed a novel in French and English containing an extremely high standard of language writing.

**Key Words:** language learning - primary education; citizenship; international education

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### Background

Mid Calder primary school is located on the outskirts of Livingston in West Lothian and has 350 pupils. French is taught throughout the school. As teacher of a class of 10-11 year old pupils I had given myself the challenge to create an International Education project which would involve Modern Foreign Languages Education and Enterprise. It had to be innovative, creative and motivating for the pupils. I already had an established eTwinning link with Florence Serange at École Antoine Pizon, Huriel, France. Earlier that year I had registered with eTwinning with the express desire to find a French partner who would be willing to share ideas and work on building motivation and increasing self-confidence when learning a second language. As a result I ended up with the perfect partnership, the children were the same age, they came from similar areas, and even the school buildings were alike!

Often the problem in having a partnership with a European school is the English speaking children quickly lose motivation and self-confidence, because their counterparts are able to speak English so well and there appears little point in attempting to communicate in any language, other than English! With this partnership, both classes were at the same level in learning each other's language and so motivation and a building of self-confidence in speaking another language was maintained.

In order to consult and collaborate, we frequently used web conferencing. This provided the communication needed to plan and discuss ideas for projects and hence, the Novel Idea was born. We began in September, 2007 and together came up with the plan to co-write a story. The French school wrote chapter one and the Scottish school wrote chapter two, and so it continued for all eight chapters. The two schools provide the appropriate illustrations and on completion we had three versions, a French/English, an English one and a French one.

The first Novel Idea was a murder mystery and when chapter one was e-mailed to me I put it onto an interactive whiteboard and the pupils came out and highlighted the words they understood. This was highly motivating, because it soon became evident that they knew a great deal of French and bit by bit they could glean the gist of the text. Working in groups, with dictionaries, the pupils were able to use previous learning to translate the text. This was further aided by illustrations from the French students. Sharing ideas, the children were able to put forward a rough draft of the chapters. Pupils were able to use peer assessment and evaluation to further develop ideas of translations.

Next, they had to write Chapter 2. There was a massive amount of literacy learning in completing this task. The children not only had to keep the flow of the story going, but also maintain the authenticity of the characters. Very often pupils had to be dissuaded from writing the follow-on chapter (which was to be written by the French pupils), because they quickly became enthralled with the storyline and wanted to continue. Motivation was further heightened because they had to wait until the French children had completed the following chapter to find out what was happening in the story. This anticipation was maintained throughout the writing of the whole book. As the French children had been allowed to create the storyline by beginning the novel the Scottish pupils were given the task to come up with a suitable ending. The whole process took six months to complete and by the end of that time the story had been typed onto Microsoft Publisher, illustrations added and a front cover designed. The sense of achievement was immense. The amount of language learning was significant. Indeed, when reading the novels it becomes clear that the use of vocabulary and sentence structure is far and above what would normally be expected of a 10-11 year old child.

The following September, both Florence and I had different classes and met frequently, via web conferencing, to discuss ways in which we could improve on the previous year's work. We looked at all the experiences and outcomes achieved and planned improvements and next steps. It was decided to continue with the Novel Idea, but this time round, we would focus more on literacy, citizenship and enterprise.

I think, as teachers we were now considerably more confident on exactly what we were trying to achieve and the results certainly mirrored this. A variety of discussion between the two schools took place and it was eventually decided to write an adventure novel. Once again the French children began by writing chapter one and e-mailing it to us on completion. This process was much the same as the previous year, with the children using their knowledge of each other's language to work out roughly what each chapter was about. It should be noted again that these children were a mere ten years old yet working on texts way beyond the level normally expected of pupils in this age bracket. Their knowledge of a language other than their native tongue was continually being explored and they were able to examine similarities in word derivations.

Most of this story for the second novel took place in the Amazonian Rainforest. During the first term the children had been studying deforestation and the resulting loss of animal habitat. Therefore, when it came to writing the story, the pupils already had a

great deal of background information about the rainforest and the animals which inhabit it.

Throughout this partnership one means of communication was the use of a blog. This allowed for each chapter to be posted up immediately on completion and enabled children and parents from both schools to read what was happening and to leave comments. As an addition to the previous year's work, all the illustrations were posted onto the blog along with a voting system and pupils and parents were able to vote on the images which were most appropriate for each chapter.

During the previous term, the class had been working on fairly unstructured stop motion animation and had decided that as published books are occasionally made into films then a DVD of the story is produced, this is what they should do. The second Novel Idea consisted of ten chapters and the class set about creating stop motion animations for eight of the chapters. They used Lego figures, a very basic webcam and a software program. There were thirty children in this class and they worked in groups of six, two children wrote the screenplay, two produced the sound effects and two worked on the backdrop. All six then got together to make the footage and provided the voice-overs.

To make the animations the pupils had to work in groups, which were fully inclusive, allowing all individuals to compete on an equal footing with their peers. Firstly, the children had to convert descriptive writing into a dialogue in order to produce the screenplay. They had to collaborate to invent suitable sound effects and use previous knowledge of the rainforest to create the backdrops.

The next stage was to film the storyline. A great deal of consultation took place in order to work through the variety of problems which arose. Using a means of trial and error, each group worked through the problems. How could they get the hero and heroine of the story to look as though they were being carried along a river and then down a waterfall? How could they film a crash scene? How could the main characters look as though they were climbing a rock face? There were a great number of problems which needed to be solved and by working as a team each group managed to come up with a solution to each problem and complete the animation. This type of discussion enabled the pupils to make many cross-curricular links. For example, when the characters were plunging down the waterfall and James' hat blows off, what will hit the bottom first, the hat or James? Will the hat ever land in the river or will it blow into the air? The children had to construct a simple experiment to find the answer.

When the English animations had been completed the children confidently made five of them in French. Once again, the learning achieved here was enormous. The children had created this story, entitled 'James Walker and the Buried Treasure' and were extremely proud of the achievement. They then made an accompanying DVD of stop motion animation in both English and French.

Originally, the front cover of the book and design cover of the DVD were identical, but the pupils thought this too boring. They used the computer program 'Comic Life' to create design covers for the DVD, which were bright and fun.

The French children were not quite so ambitious, Florence brought in an actor to work with the children and produce a play of the story, but they only did this in French. This, however, was a further asset to my class as Florence sent us the video and the children were able to watch it and understand what was being said because they knew the story so well.

The second Novel Idea was completed in March 2009, just in time for World Book Day and the children decided this would be an excellent time to have a book launch. They designed invitations to parents, created huge mock-ups of some of the illustrations and made a video showing footage from both schools giving brief descriptions of their books in each other's language.

As part of the enterprise for the book launch the pupils gave some readings from the novel, showed clips of the video and finished with a book signing. They decided to sell the book for £2.99 and the DVD for £5, but if one bought the two together they came up with a bargain price of £6.50! The children produced a spreadsheet showing sales and worked in groups to produce the books and DVDs based on the orders taken at the launch. The children decided to donate the profits from the sales to our partner school in Uganda and created a logo to go on the back of the book which would ascertain that anyone buying the book would know what was happening to the proceeds from the sales.

It is all very well to learn another language, but is of little use if you cannot be understood by native speakers. Therefore, as each animation was completed it was posted onto the blog for the French children to watch. Feedback was essential, as a means of assessment, how well could the Scottish pupils be understood? The comments were extremely favourable; as it seems that apart from the distinct Scottish accent the French children were able to follow the dialogue and were impressed by the fluency of their Scottish partners.

I entered the creation of James Walker and the Buried Treasure as the school's submission for the European Award for Languages 2009 and was fortunate enough to be successful in being the only primary school in the United Kingdom to receive the award that year.

Finally, I move on to the present session and Novel Idea 3. Again, we both had different classes and came up with a topic which would interest both classes. This time round the story would be about witchcraft and wizardry and 'Teruvia, the Little Red Book' was created. The format was the same. Florence and I now had the experience of knowing exactly what worked and what did not and we used this successful formula to instigate enthusiasm and motivate our classes to even greater achievement. Again, ten chapters were achieved, as the collaboration and writing takes from September until March to complete and ten chapters appears to be the optimum number.

Novel Idea 3 has just been completed and in my view is by far the best yet. On 4<sup>th</sup> March 2010 I showcased my Novel Idea projects at the Learning & Teaching Scotland conference *Developing Global Citizens through Modern Foreign Language Education* at

Hampden Park in Glasgow. A number of colleagues were surprised by the quality of language used in this story. I explained how I went about achieving this: First, I arrange the pupils into groups of six. In each group there is a scribe. The pupils share their ideas and the scribe bullet points them. Next, the five scribes get together to write the chapter. This method gives every child a chance of being a scribe and therefore to be a main contributor to the storyline.

Novel Idea 3 was posted onto the International Education GLOW<sup>1</sup> page which allowed the children to share the story with their parents. The GLOW discussion board allowed the pupils to consult with parents on the most appropriate title for the book and GLOW chat gave a forum for discussion and possible plots and next steps. The blog works in parallel with GLOW, because it can be viewed by the children and parents from the French school.

To sum up, the fairly simple idea of co-writing a story has provided the structure the pupils need to then take autonomy and work through their own ideas and aspirations. In my view, the Novel Idea project is easily transferrable and could be used by students from ten to eighteen years. As the children get more experience in Modern Foreign Language Education the project can be made more difficult by writing in the other's language. It can also be completed in any two languages which the children in question are learning.

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To view some of our work online click on the links below

[Creating a Talking Book - Modern Languages in a Primary School](#) (GLOW page)

[Novel Idea wikispace](#)

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<sup>1</sup> GLOW is Scotland's national intranet for education. For more information go to <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/glowscotland/>

