

Using an E-journal: Students (aged 11 to 20) from 7 European Countries Write a "Novel by Chapters"

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Abstract

In the Comenius project ETM (Exploring Innovative and Creative Ways of Teaching Using New Tools and Methods) schools from Spain, Germany, Italy, Romania, Greece, Poland, and England develop and implement creative/innovative ICT-based content and new pedagogies designed to strengthen students' learning skills.

Apart from the teachers sharing/developing knowledge, skills and expertise regarding e-learning materials/methodologies the students engage in a collaborative project. In Year One it was a "Novel By Chapters". This means that based on a general storyline groups of students of each country wrote a chapter of the novel in English, including links to pictures, films, etc. from the internet. The general instructions and the chapters were published in the ejournal ipm713, so that the students could follow online how the story was developing and get the necessary clues for their parts. At a project meeting in Naples in April 2010 students met and together they wrote the final chapter of the novel.

The objective of this approach was to strengthen students' acquisition of learning skills. It was designed to increase students' motivation and to improve their learning at various levels, as it provided a wide range of learning opportunities, catered for different learning styles, and was suited to a variety of abilities and individual needs. It was meant to help to facilitate a user-friendly approach to ICT and language learning. The students were to acquire social competences by supporting each other during the project work. Furthermore, they were supposed to gain an insight into cultural similarities as well as differences, thus accepting and understanding the diverse cultures represented in European society.

Although the students were aged 11 to 20, they all could engage in this project, as the 11-year-olds were primary school children from England, having the advantage of writing the novel in their mother tongue.

In the oral presentation, above mentioned points will be explained and elaborated, advantages and disadvantages will be discussed and concrete examples will be shown.

1. Introduction

"How could students from seven European countries (aged 11 to 20) work on a common project?"

This was the question we posed when planning the first year of our Comenius project[1] ETM (Exploring Innovative and Creative Ways of Teaching Using New Tools and Methods). Our project brings together teachers and students from seven European countries: Spain, Italy, Romania, Greece, Poland, the UK and Germany. Different types of schools and age groups are involved: a primary school, grammar schools, comprehensive schools and vocational colleges. Besides giving the teachers the opportunity to share and develop their skills and expertise in e-learning materials/methodologies, the students are also involved in this collaborative project.

2. Novel by Chapters (storyline)

In year one we decided to write a "Novel by Chapters", i.e. based on a general storyline, groups of students of each country would write a chapter of a novel in English.

We agreed on the following storyline:

Pupils/students try to find different pieces of a puzzle containing a formula that will enable free electricity to be generated by all and in this way save our planet. They must travel to all their partners' seven countries to each find a piece. It starts with two children (boy and girl) in Devon contacting two children in Hamburg who are looking for the second piece and so on. Once the puzzle is completed the group of children travel to Brussels to present the formula to the President of the European Commission.

All students were to write this final chapter together. At a project meeting in Naples students from the seven partner schools would then present their final chapter and decide on the best one. When writing the story the students should make it interesting by including interactive elements like quizzes, riddles, pictures, sounds, little films, links to websites etc. Furthermore, each country should include information typical for their region, e.g. food, customs, sights etc.

The general instructions and the chapters were to be published in the ejournal [2] ipm713 (<http://ejournal.eduprojects.net/ipm713>), so that the students could follow online how the story was developing and get the necessary clues for their parts. We hoped that these instructions would enable students of all age groups to contribute their parts according to their age level and knowledge. As the youngest children are primary-school children from England, they have the advantage of writing the novel in their mother tongue which would have been otherwise difficult. They were also the ones to start the story.

3. Objectives

The main objective of this approach was to strengthen students' acquisition of learning skills. It was designed to increase students' motivation and to improve their learning at various levels, as it provided a wide range of learning opportunities, catered to different learning styles, and was suited to a variety of abilities and individual needs. It was meant to help facilitate a user-friendly approach to ICT and language learning. It was hoped the students would acquire social competences by supporting each other during the project work. Furthermore, they should gain an insight into cultural similarities as well as differences, thus accepting and understanding the diverse cultures represented in European society.

4. Procedure at our school

We are a vocational college with students aged 16 to 20+. In our English classes we teach general topics like "the media" and "immigration in the United States", but also more specialised topics such as "marketing" and "white-collar crime". English is generally a subject that a lot of students find hard to cope with. The contents of the topics are rather demanding and when they start attending our school their linguistic competence in English is by far not as good as it could be expected after six years of English in secondary school. Students are often unfamiliar with grammatical structures and their range of vocabulary is rather limited so that they are frustrated when confronted with difficult texts and when they cannot express themselves as they would like to. That is the reason why many students have a low motivation. Most of the topics are set by the school authorities, and we have to prepare our students for their final exams, so that there is not much extra time during lessons.

Therefore we decided to offer the "Novel by Chapters" as an extra-curricular activity to interested students. We informed all our students in grade 12 (aged 17+) about the project and the "Novel by Chapters", giving them detailed instructions regarding the storyline. As an incentive they had the possibility to participate in the project meeting with all partner schools in Naples (funded by the European Commission). As the students are fairly mature, we thought they could manage without too much assistance on our part. Nevertheless, we offered them the support of ICT and English teachers. It turned out that they didn't need it. More than 20 students were interested initially and finally three groups of two to three students qualified for the project meeting in Naples.

Our criteria for choosing the best story were:

- it should be at least two pages long
- the fixed storyline and information from the previous chapter must be taken into account
- interactive elements (links, photos, riddles etc.) should be included
- information about Hamburg and the German culture must be provided
- the storyline should be interesting and creative.

5. Procedure at other schools

Each school was free to proceed as they thought fit, taking into account the age of their pupils/students, the curriculum etc.

The first chapter of the story was written by English primary school children. Naturally, they didn't have any language problems. However, they needed more guidelines how to write a story than older students who are used to reading and who have already been introduced to the basics of creative writing. Therefore their teacher furnished them with a story scaffold, pointing out in detail how to begin by setting the scene, introducing the main characters and so on, but also giving instructions as to the contents, namely that they should include the main cause of changing weather patterns around the world and the phrase "global warming". In some countries the project was carried out during regular English lessons, in others cross-curricular teaching and learning (e.g. English and history, or ICT and English) took place.

6. Results

Pupils/students from all partner schools managed to write their chapter on time (there were only two weeks between the publishing dates of the chapters, therefore the pupils/students had to write their basic storyline beforehand and only adapt some details). Amazingly, they wrote between 2200 and 3200 words in English which is more than they had probably ever written before. The use of internet links and other interactive elements varied. Some students created suspense by including riddles that could only be solved by using the Caesar shift cipher [3], for example, some made it interesting with photos, others included links to relevant internet sites, for instance, to a film on YouTube showing a stallholder advertising his eels at the Hamburg Fischmarkt or to a description of the Neapolitan smorfia (it links words to lotto numbers and is used for interpreting dreams). The Polish students even made a little film with some music. Thus a lot of cultural background information on the different countries was included. Also the topic of "global warming" was addressed in the chapters.

The whole novel turned out to be fairly coherent, the individual chapters being linked to each other. There were just some minor mistakes, for example that the German children vanished into thin air between two chapters.



Although it was originally planned that the students present their final chapters at the project meeting, the best one being chosen, they decided to write the final chapter together, taking parts of the different national chapters. This was actually a better solution.

7. Evaluation

During the writing process and afterwards students and teachers evaluated the work and its progress. Questionnaires and interviews were used for this purpose.

The students stated that they had enjoyed writing the novel in their national groups as well as the final chapter in international groups in Naples and that they had been highly motivated.

As for the objectives of this approach:

A wide range of learning opportunities was provided:

The pupils/students practised reading comprehension by having to understand the storyline and the chapters of their partners.

They had to write a long, coherent text in English, forming complex sentences and using elaborate vocabulary. By doing so they learned new words.

Unlike in the classroom students felt the actual need of using English. They had to use strategies to overcome language barriers and develop their communication skills since, at the project meeting in Naples, they had to communicate with their peers from the partner schools.

Different learning styles were catered for as by writing the chapter in groups individual students could focus on either the storyline, the language, the technical side, doing research on the internet or designing the pages. They had to cooperate in their national groups as well as in international groups at the project meeting. So they acquired social competences by supporting each other.

The students gained an insight into European cultures. First, by doing research when writing their own chapters their awareness was sharpened as to their own national culture (traditions, food, sights, history and so on). When reading the chapters of the other nationalities they got acquainted with cultural features of six other European countries, some of them not too familiar to them (for example, it was interesting for the German students to learn something about Romania and Greece). As it was an exciting story and not just facts, it was a good way to attract students' attention.

Stereotypes in particular were overcome during the project meeting when students met their European partners and when they worked together on the final chapter of the novel.

The project work also facilitated a user-friendly approach to ICT:

The students used the ejournal as a platform for reading the chapters of the other groups, they had to use the internet to find information, and they had to find out how to insert pictures and links into a document.

8. Improvements

The outcome can truly be regarded as successful. However, some improvements could still be made:

Due to a tight schedule the teachers came up with the basic storyline. It would also be possible to put it more into the hands of students, for instance by letting groups of students create the structure of the novel. They would either have to meet or they could collect ideas in the ejournal.

It was also a bit of a pity that the students didn't know each other before the final project meeting. They read their partners' chapters, but only a few of them e-mailed with each other. By involving them



more in the first place they might have felt the need to exchange ideas and letting the others take part in the development of their chapters. They could also have given the necessary clues a little earlier as two weeks was rather short.

This kind of approach could also be used on a smaller scale, involving just two countries but several classes of the same school. Then the storyline would have to be changed accordingly, so that maybe different seasons and festivities could be mentioned. The age of the students might vary a little, but involving 11-year-olds and 20+-year-olds was only possible because the 11-year-olds were native speakers.

9. Conclusion

Writing a Novel by Chapters is a useful and effective means to make students read and write in English, and use it in natural communication. The creative element is very motivating and it is amazing to see how well students use the new media and how much they enjoy doing so. It is very rewarding for students to take part in such a big project with a result that can be read on the internet. Students feel proud when they can present cultural highlights of their native country, but it is also interesting for them to learn about other countries. It is a break in the routine of ordinary English classes and its rather limited and highly structured assignments.

References

[1] „The Comenius Programme focuses on all levels of school education (...)” and is „part of the EU’s Lifelong Learning Programme.

Comenius aims to

- improve and increase the mobility of pupils and educational staff across the EU
- enhance and increase partnerships between schools in different EU Member States, with at least 3 million pupils taking part in joint educational activities by 2010;
- encourage language learning, innovative ICT-based content, services and better teaching techniques and practises;
- enhance the quality and European dimension of teacher training;
- improve pedagogical approaches and school management.”

http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc84_en.htm

[2] An ejournal is an internet platform for publishing articles. It provides browsing as well as searching functions.

[3] Encryption by shifting letters, invented by J. Caesar.