

The girls joined in lessons and held discussion groups with their peers about the differences between the South African and English curriculum and schools.

On returning home they shared their impressions with the rest of the school through PowerPoint presentations and displays.

Participating teachers feel equally privileged and continue to benefit both professionally and personally from the friendship. Moreover, their South African colleagues have left their mark in more ways than one.

Not only did visiting staff teach some lessons, they have given the geography department statistics, case studies and other first-hand materials that are now used in class.

You do not have to travel to far-flung destinations to bring foreign culture alive. A trip to the Young Vic to see *Amazônia*, which tells the story of the vanishing rainforest, combined geography and global issues in an exuberant display of Brazilian music and dance.

Annual visits from Senegalese dancers and drummers add a splash of local colour to year 8 geography, which features Senegal as an example of a Less Economically Developed Country (LEDC). The choice of a francophone country is no coincidence, as this part of the syllabus is taught in French by modern languages staff.

The aim is threefold: to promote cross-curricular learning, provide linguistic challenge, and replace conventional modern foreign languages content with something more sophisticated and outward looking.

The same methodology re-appears in year 10 with a module on agriculture and the Normandy landings, which includes an excursion to France to see Second World War sites and a dairy farm.

If work of this kind broadens horizons and raises the intellectual stakes, a venture for AS and A level French students sets the bar even higher. Run by the Flemish regional government of Belgium, the European classes programme invites four schools from four different countries to choose an aspect of European legislation they would like to introduce or amend.

Following several months of preparation, participants meet up in the historic surroundings of Alden Biesen Castle, where they present their case in any language other than their mother tongue in a simulated Council of Ministers debate.

For this year's event, the Southend delegation proposed modifying the Schengen Agreement and setting up a European police force to counteract the spread of organised crime.

"We deliberately chose a controversial theme," said head of modern languages Barbara Dresner.

"Although we lobbied hard and made concessions on our Schengen proposal, it was voted down; but the one for a European police force went through. It was great fun and gave the students fantastic insight into the democratic political process."

Clearly the experience paid handsome dividends linguistically, but there were abundant other benefits too. "It was of immense value to people doing A level politics and today one girl proudly informed me that in her sociology class she had been able to explain the links between criminality and the absence of border controls," said Ms Dresner.

"Their knowledge of geography has improved just by being in a part of Europe that is a dynamic, multinational crossroads. And history, of course, since you can't understand the Schengen Agreement without understanding the break-up of the Soviet bloc. While we were there we also visited the European parliament, Maastricht, Aachen and toured a Brussels art gallery with a commentary in French."

Last, but by no means least, it has boosted the self-confidence

of reticent girls who normally shun the limelight. "They had to speak. And they did, most eloquently. What's more, they enjoyed it. The universal verdict was that this was the best school trip of their lives," Ms Dresner concluded.

Case study: Northfleet School for Girls, Kent

Ready-made educational projects are just one part of the Rafi.ki service. With its bank of potential partners from around the world, facilitators on hand to provide help and advice, and a safe environment for trouble-free communication, Rafi.ki makes an excellent platform for international projects of your own.

Like Design4U, a business challenge for year 9 devised by the ICT, maths and business studies departments of Northfleet School for Girls in Kent.

The brief was for young people from Morocco, Gambia, Uganda, Ghana and the Philippines to design logos for tee-shirts, which the English pupils would edit, put into graphics format and print, before sending the finished garments back to the creators. All in the short space of four or five weeks.

"Working in teams, they started by allocating roles such as manager and accountant, then came up with a business plan. Everything had to be costed, from buying the tee-shirts to producing advertising leaflets and paying for printing and postage," explained Abderrahmane Benjeddi, innovations leader at the business and enterprise specialist school.

Meeting the tight deadline was not easy, all the more so as their business associates operated in different time zones and had limited facilities.

"In one instance, the nearest computer was an hour away, so the teacher became the messenger, dispatching work out of school hours. That in itself was quite an eye-opener for our pupils," said Mr Benjeddi.

Despite these hurdles, negotiations went on apace as manufacturers and designers discussed alterations to initial drafts.

"For example, one school produced a design that would not have shown up. Our students had to explain what was wrong and how to correct it. They did their job very well. When the revised version came through, it was absolutely fine," Mr Benjeddi continued.

When the big day came, a production line swung into action, with everyone assigned to a specific link in the chain. The tee-shirts were duly printed, packaged and sent off, to the huge satisfaction of all.

The project was such a success, there are plans to repeat it next year. Meanwhile, every pupil in the school has been given access to Rafi.ki for their own personal use. "Some people regularly chat online with other teenagers from around the world. When they first start talking, they are more interested in discussing what they have in common than where they come from. If a Man United supporter links up with someone from India who supports the same team, that is what unites them. Geographical boundaries disappear," said Mr Benjeddi.

Case study: Coombeshead College, Devon

The aim of the 100 x 100 project was to bring students together from around the world and share their images of the various places they come from. Students from all across Devon were asked to submit photographic images of their locality, environment, a special place, somewhere that had a personal meaning, a place they had travelled to or had fond memories of.

We decided upon photography as the medium of choice because it has become increasingly popular at A Level and now GCSE. It also widened up the potential audience and

enabled everybody to participate across the entire age-range.

The invite then went out around the globe via Rafi.ki for other students to send us digital images of their home or somewhere of personal importance. The aim was to create a collection that showed an intimate portrait of the world through the eyes of its students.

We wanted to develop the sense of global community in a visual way giving students from Devon the chance to see not only familiar places in their locality but also what it was like to view the world through the eyes of their peers from around the world.

Our previous international work had been successful but had usually centred around certain departments focusing on particular countries or cultures. This project was far more ambitious and spontaneous and we had no idea what response we would get.

However, the response was amazing with eight Devon schools participating and numerous schools, teachers and students from various countries also submitting work.

The exhibition grew and changed as students started to submit work from their international travels and places that they had strong memories of – and so they determined the outcomes as a whole.

The collection created was the first of its kind in Devon. It is not an ordinary photographic collection based on a theme. It is not the usual images we see in galleries or via the media. This is the perspective of a world from a new generation.

The benefits have far exceeded what we originally set out to do – the exhibition has now become an online webpage for students, teachers and the community to view and use as a teaching resource. The exhibition has toured various conferences and schools enabling more and more people to have access to it. But most of all, it has started new enthusiasm about not only photography and visual media, but exploring new places and connections.

New links and relationships have been made at a number of levels – locally, nationally and internationally.

Discussions are now underway for the next 100 x 100 project – and we are looking at creating an exhibition for the South West that would include submissions from Devon, Cornwall, Somerset and Dorset exploring local networks.

We hope you enjoy the collection and will spend time strolling through the fields in Devon, pushing your way around New York, wading through snow in Iceland, or walking around a crowded market in Indonesia.

For more information, visit www.coombeshead.devon.sch.uk

• *Sam Eyre is an art and photography teacher and regional subject advisor at Coombeshead College.*

Case study: Central Foundation Girls' School, London

As the assistant head and international co-ordinator of Central Foundation Girls' School in Tower Hamlets, I have been working with Peru Muhsen from Koya Secondary School for Girls in the Kurdish Autonomous Region of Iraq, using Rafi.ki to deepen our international links.

In March, we co-ordinated an innovative e-learning day for Central Foundation year 7 and 8 students. Part of the thinking behind the day is that it is a stimulus to experiment with new ideas, to bring people in from outside, to trial new ways of teaching and learning with fairly small groups of students.

During the event, students from the school enjoyed sessions ranging from investments and share trading to blogging in French. However, for many students the highlight was creating e-books with their Iraqi partners.

Students were paired up and they then used the Rafi.ki instant messaging tools to refine their story ideas. They were then able to create multimedia pages with sound and graphics.

The pupils touched on politics in online discussions.

There was some talk about their attitudes to the invasion of Iraq. Our school is predominantly Muslim and generally the staff and students were very anti the invasion, whereas people in Kurdistan were pro.

The pupils enjoyed meeting people online from a very different background and having their preconceptions challenged. There were also things to learn about modifying your English when dealing with people who do not have it as their first language.

Shayi and Soma, students from Koya, have been the most active users of the site, communicating via email and instant message with students from 106 countries.

When asked why she valued the links so highly, Shayi said: "Because I shall know more peoples around the world and know more about their cultures, history, society and personality, and I want to tell them about ours too, and give them more information about our country, how we live, and our culture, holidays, dress and food."

Central Foundation now has the full Department for Children, Schools and Families International School Award and has forged successful links with schools in Kenya, Brazil and South Africa.

Staff have recently visited Sylhet and Dhaka in Bangladesh, while Peru Muhsen from Koya has visited us in London.

During the e-learning day, also through Rafi.ki, Central Foundation students were able to communicate directly with Jamie Buchanan-Dunlop, a scientist working on the EBase in the Antarctic. They were able to ask him questions about climate change and living in sub-zero conditions and came away inspired to make changes in their own lifestyles, starting with not leaving their mobile phones on charge at night.

• *Janet Chapman is assistant headteacher at Central Foundation Girls' School in east London.*

Further information

Rafi.ki is an online global community working to facilitate links abroad. Schools can join for free with "silver membership" status, which gives you the chance to begin communicating with other schools worldwide.

"Gold membership" is a paid for service costing £750 a year. This gives full access to all areas of the community including all projects and resources. You will be assigned a facilitator who will help you get started and given support, training and advice. Visit: www.rafi.ki

• *Alison Thomas is a freelance education journalist.*