

Iraqi school logs on to like minds in UK

Cultural links thrive as pupils use international school networking site for collaborative projects

By Helen Ward

A secondary in Iraq has become the most frequent user of an award-winning international school networking site.

Koya Secondary School for Girls in northern Iraq caters for 15 to 17-year-olds. It was built in 1959, originally for boys and girls.

The school was introduced to Rafi.ki, an online learning community, through its British partner, the Central Foundation Girls' School in Tower Hamlets, east London.

It signed up to the site, which takes its name from the Swahili for "friend", three months ago. Today pupils are sending some 350 messages a month to other schools around the world.

Janet Chapman, assistant head of the Tower Hamlets school, said: "We've been in touch with Koya School for about two years since the British Council invited us to a conference in Bahrain to set up links between schools in the UK and the Middle East.

"I met Peru Muhsen, a teacher at Koya, at the conference and set up a link, but it was delayed at the beginning because there was no postal service and no internet connection."

Nevertheless, the teachers kept in touch, and once an internet connection was established they started working together online.

Earlier this month, the London school held an ICT day for Years 7 and 8. One workshop included creating a book with pupils in the Iraqi school 2,500 miles away.

The pupils used Rafi.ki to discuss the story and plan it, then they all accessed a "virtual school" - or managed learning environment - that allowed them to create online pages with sounds, images and text.

The workshop was run by Mina Patel, curriculum consultant for the London Grid for Learning. She said: "It was fantastic to see the girls in Tower Hamlets collaborate with the girls in Iraq in real time to carry out the same task. The girls worked in pairs: one girl from CFGS was paired with one girl in Iraq."

The book featured the cartoon characters Tom and Jerry and three little pigs going to get an ice-cream.

However, the aim of the project was not so much the end product, but learning about ICT and making intercultural links.

Ms Chapman said: "There were some technical issues because their internet connection is very slow, so there were times when we lost the connection. That meant the degree of collaboration was better than the finished product.

The pupils even touched on politics in online discussions, she said: "There was some talk about their attitudes to the invasion of Iraq. Our school is predominantly Muslim and, generally, the staff and



students are very anti the invasion, whereas people in Kurdistan were pro.

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

Ms Muhsen agreed: "The Connecting Classrooms (British Council project) is a very good chance for me and my pupils in many ways. The best one is opening the pupils' eyes and introducing them to other parts of the world - and learning English is a big motivation. In my country, girls can't go to an internet centre very freely any time they like, but now we have an internet centre in our school."

John MacNutt, director of Rafi.ki, said: "The Iraqi school is our most active user. Almost every day we find students from that school online."

Rafi.ki won this year's Education Resources Award - presented by the British Educational Suppliers Association - for providing the best 21st-century learning environment.

www.rafi.ki

Getting engaged

Rafi.ki was launched in January 2007 and became the focus of research earlier this year by Richard Shotton, an expert on the use of ICT for international collaboration based at Manchester Metropolitan University.

He analysed questionnaires from 148 teachers in 46 countries, and 393 students in 32 countries. Mr Shotton found that almost all the teachers said Rafi.ki helped to motivate students; 55 per cent said it had a very significant impact on the most disengaged learners.

Nine out of 10 students logged on to the website both in and outside school - a quarter of them checked it every day.

Rafi.ki was most commonly used in modern foreign languages and geography classes, but was also used often in design and technology, maths and science.

