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Connecting classrooms with Skype

A teacher in a local school sets out to enhance the education process by introducing a more interactive and global learning process into the classroom, writes **Balqis Lim**

MENTION Skype and you'll think of the chat and video calls platform used for casual face-to-face chats. But are you aware that other than for informal chats, there are also lots of untapped resources available via Skype for educational use?

In preparing students for 21st-century learning, one school — or rather one teacher from Sekolah Kebangsaan Tiara Permai in Jalan Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur — decided on a proactive strategy. She began to use Skype in the Classroom by Microsoft to improve on the quality of learning.

Skype in the Classroom is a free community that offers live transformative educational experiences for students and

includes virtual field trips, talks by guest speakers, classroom-to-classroom connections and live collaboration projects. Basically, it allows students to experience new cultures over Skype, in or out of the classroom.

Fifty-five-year-old Fadzillah Mohamed Osman had always hoped to do something unique in her school, so when a fellow teacher introduced Skype in the classroom, she got hooked.

"This tool gives a great opportunity for my students to communicate with friends from outside the country. As most of my students are also very shy, this allows for the perfect exposure — to gain confidence to converse in English," says Fadzillah.

She adds that Skype also allows for visual aids where teachers can show their students how they want something to be done on a given project.

HOW IT BEGINS

Fadzillah, who has over 30 years of experience in teaching Music, Visual Arts, ICT and Mathematics, is also in charge of the school's library and resource centre.

She started the first Skype session in late 2015, with a primary music school in Balatonboglar, Hungary. They introduced our traditional music instruments to the Hungarian students and also learnt to sing one of their Suss Fel Nap.

Over the years, SK Tiara Permai has

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Fadzillah Mohamed Osman



Marzalina showing samples of plants to students via Skype.

successfully collaborated with several other countries including India (2016), Qatar (2016), Pakistan (2016), Thailand (2017), Australia (2017) and Brazil (2017).

As Skype in the Classroom is still relatively new, Fadzillah says it is not incorporated by all the teachers as a learning tool for each subject. She sometimes initiates the activity during the

co-curricular period. She says the most memorable Skype session was a batik painting demonstration last year.

"On May last year, I had invited a former SK Tiara Permai art teacher and batik master, Ismail Ahmad, to do a demonstration for schools from the European countries and Vietnam. Eight schools joined our Sky-

pe session. The educators and students involved were very excited and interested in our batik painting technique using wax.

"Indirectly, SK Tiara Permai has introduced the art heritage of our country to the world," adds Fadzillah.

Besides sharing sessions, Skype in the Classroom is also used as a collaboration



Fadzillah (left) and Mohammad Aliff Othman are the two certified Skype Master Teachers in Malaysia.

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Students from the Photography and Science and Maths Club having a Skype session with Forest Research Institute Malaysia Forestry Biotechnology Division director Datuk Dr Marzalina Mansor.

tool. SK Tiara Permai collaborated with six other schools in Malaysia for a #beatplasticpollution campaign.

During the Skype session, demonstrations on the hazards of plastic and environmental pollution were carried out by Year 6 pupils. The information on seven recyclable plastics and the activities that were done to reduce pollution was shared with the peers involved, and received good feedback.

CHALLENGES

As one of two Skype Master Teachers in the country, Fadzillah says having a good Internet connection is hard to come by. "The Internet is unstable and there are times when it breaks. This greatly disturbs the Skype session.

"During some sessions, teachers have even used their own broadband and WiFi routers from the teachers' room because the school does not have enough routers to accommodate Internet access throughout the premises," she says. Another challenge would be to have all the school teachers of SK Tiara Permai utilise Skype in the Classroom as a learning tool.

"Some teachers are not tech-savvy and thus it's a challenge for them to use Skype. As of now, I have five teachers who have followed in my footsteps and begun their own Skype sessions in class."

SKYPE ROOM

Given that Skype in the Classroom plays an important part in student enrolment, the school, together with its Parent-Teacher Association, took the initiative to have a dedicated room for Skype.

Launched last month, Fadzillah says they refurbished an empty room to make it more comfortable for students to conduct Skype sessions. Previously, Fadzillah and her students utilised the library for their sessions. The launch also marks SK Tiara Permai as the first school in the country to have a special room exclusively for Skype sessions.

There isn't a single student who hasn't gotten something out of the experience, she says. In fact, after a Skype session, students always ask for more and various activities were carried out throughout 2018 to get the children equipped with the right skills and values for the future.

In moving forward, Fadzillah hopes to conduct training sessions for all SK Tiara Permai educators and introduce Skype in the Classroom to more teachers nationwide.

She will also diversify activities for the Skype sessions — cooking demonstrations, inviting local personalities for students to interact with and interview, and run projects. Her ultimate goal is to make SK Tiara Permai a Microsoft Showcase School.

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