

Raising children's intercultural understanding of France to increase motivation for language learning using drama

Amy Lennon

Abstract

This action research project investigates the impact of increasing children's intercultural understanding of France, on their motivation for language learning; which is considered one of the key factors for success. The project was delivered in five one-hour lessons; each based on one of the five essential elements for developing intercultural understanding in Byram's (1967) Intercultural Communicative Competence model (ICC). One teacher worked with eight year six students to teach them about the French Revolution, using a drama-based pedagogy, which concluded with their own performance of it. The data for each lesson was analysed against the corresponding five elements of Byram's ICC model to see how well the children's intercultural understanding was developing and whether this was having an impact on their motivation for language learning. The results showed that the children were able to develop their intercultural understanding of France in all five areas of the model and that their motivation for language learning had increased; setting them up well for a successful future of learning modern foreign languages.

Key words: Intercultural understanding (IU), action research, French, Byram, Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), 'savoirs', modern foreign languages, drama, motivation.

1. Introduction

Byram and Doyé (2000) argue that to thrive in a country where another language is spoken, it is insufficient to simply speak the language; one must have understanding of the country's culture too; intercultural understanding (IU). Byram (1997) proposed the model of 'Intercultural Communicative Competence' (ICC) made up of five elements or 'savoirs' he considered essential for developing IU (in Byram and Doyé (2000) (Appendix 1). These are: intercultural attitudes, interpreting and relating, discovery and interaction, knowledge and critical cultural awareness; ('savoir' translates to know or knowledge from the French). In 2013, Driscoll, Earl and Cable conducted the Nuffield Inquiry into the teaching and learning of IU in modern foreign

languages in forty primary schools over three years. They concluded that it is a life-long skill, an essential part of being a citizen, an important part of modern foreign language learning and that children enjoy it.

Arguably, IU is the foundation of the Key Stage two curriculum for languages whose opening line directly addresses this as the purpose for language learning: “Learning a foreign language is a liberation from insularity and provides an opening to other cultures”. (Great Britain. Department for Education, 2013:193). The opening preamble states that language learning at Key Stage two should stimulate curiosity and deepen understanding of the world, to prepare pupils to study and work abroad (Great Britain. Department for Education, 2013).

There has been much debate about the main factors in successful language learning, and studies such as the report by Burstall et al (1974, in Jones and Coffey, 2013) have led to widespread dispute of the critical period hypothesis first proposed by Lenneberg in 1967 (in Hurford, 1991). The hypothesis states that the younger a person starts learning another language the more proficient they will become. However, Jones and Coffey (2013) argue that enjoyment of languages, international awareness and enhanced understanding are the main factors in successful language learning which form the rationale for the Key stage two Framework for languages (Great Britain. Department for Education, 2005).

The theme for the project was the French Revolution. A historical festival encompasses many elements of a country’s culture, with most countries and cultures having their own equivalent for comparison, which is an important part of the ICC model (Byram, 1997 in Byram and Doyé, 2000). Cameron (2001) suggests that theme-based learning is a way of teaching primary languages where the focus is not wholly on the language itself. It provides realistic opportunities to use the language and lends itself to performance; which is motivating for children.

When considering the element of performance, Even (2008) states that a drama pedagogy can open up different worlds to learners and strives to overcome the cognitive isolation of language learning. As drama uses a holistic approach, it helps create intensive experiences with foreign language, literature and culture. The director of the Multilingual Performance Project (2016), which seeks to increase

awareness of the creativity of languages to generate enthusiasm for language learning, suggested hot seating the main figures of the French revolution to get to know them and to inform a performance (Tyler-McTighe, 2020). Questioning children in character helps them to empathise and connect with the character and hot seating allows children to co-construct a character jointly by asking and answering questions, helping them get more deeply into character (Even, 2008).

2. Methodology

Design

An Action research methodology was employed to explore the impact of developing IU through my own teaching approaches in the classroom. It involved collecting a range of data from children's experiences and analysing and reflecting on them; making changes to the lessons in light of the evidence (Cremin et al., 2008).

The Key Stage 2 framework is composed of three core strands for successful language learning; one of these being IU (Great Britain. Department for education, 2005). It gives three learning objectives for IU in year six: compare attitudes towards aspects of everyday life, recognise and understand some of the differences between people and present information about an aspect of culture. These learning objectives directly complement the five 'savoirs' of Byram's (1997) ICC model, for developing IU (in Byram and Doyé, 2000). Therefore, I used this model to base my lessons around and to measure outcomes against; conducting five, one-hour lessons on each of the 'savoirs'. Each lesson was based on the theme of the French Revolution and employed a drama-based pedagogy.

Data

Data was collected in each lesson through knowledge harvests to measure the increase in understanding, as well as audio recordings, photographs and written work. The project concluded with a piece of drama about the French Revolution designed and performed by the group and a questionnaire about their experience. All data was analysed against each of the corresponding five elements of Byram's

(1997) ICC model (in Byram and Doyé, 2000) to see what elements of IU the children had developed and whether their motivation for language learning was increasing.

Ethics

The study was initially outlined to the group to see if they wanted to participate. Once they had agreed, a letter of consent which outlined the project was sent out to parents. Consent was requested for participation, use of audio recordings and photographs. Participants and their parents were told they had the right to withdraw without reason at any time, how the data would be securely stored, that they had a right to anonymity and who the data would be shared with; all agreed.

3. Data analysis and Findings

The data showed that IU had increased against each of the five 'savoirs' of the ICC model (Byram 1997, in Byram and Doyé, 2000). However, two elements (Savoir être and Savoir apprendre/faire), featured most strongly in the findings. The 'savoirs' are not mutually exclusive, but for illustrative purposes the evidence for each 'savoir' will be broken down separately.

Savoir être (to be): intercultural attitudes

This is arguably the foundation of IU; being curious about and open to other cultures.

Knowledge harvest

This showed the progression of the group's intercultural understanding over the five lessons. In lesson one, the children's current knowledge of France was captured (Appendix 2) and by lesson five it had greatly increased (Appendix 3). By lesson three, they were able to produce a story board in two groups of the key events of the French Revolution (Appendix 4).

Knowledge of culture

In order to increase knowledge of French culture, children need to first understand what culture is and what it includes. As a result of their learning, they were able to compare aspects of French culture such as flags, history, language, fashion, food

and celebrations with British culture and their own. This comparison helped to increase their knowledge of British culture too.

Savoir apprendre/faire (to learn/do): skills of discovery and interaction

Exploring key characters of the French Revolution

The group created a mind map of the key characters of the French Revolution with assistance (Appendix 5). They then used this to independently inform their performance when being hot seated in character.

Drama performance

By the final lesson the group were able to independently put together a performance of the French Revolution using their new knowledge.

Talking about flags

The group read aloud a piece of work in French that they had written, comparing the French and English flags with those from their own cultures, as part of their drama performance (Appendix 6).

Savoir comprendre (to understand): skills of interpreting and relating

Translation

The children were able to translate what they knew about the French, English and their own flags into French. The translation was scaffolded by writing the vocabulary they already knew in the sentence and filling in the gaps with new vocabulary.

Savoirs (knowledge): Knowledge of social groups

Discussion on French culture

As a result of their learning, the group were able to compare aspects of French group culture with British, and their own; such as special celebrations.

Child A said:

“I did this dance at my sister’s wedding” whilst showing me a traditional Kosovan dance.

Savoir s'engager (to engage): critical cultural awareness of perspectives, practices and products

Discussion on French culture

The group were able to compare aspects of French culture such as flags, food and school with both British, and their own cultures.

Child B said:

“No School on Wednesdays!” when comparing and contrasting French and British schools.

Measures of motivation

There was evidence for increased motivation for language learning throughout the process.

Concluding questionnaire measuring motivation (Appendix 7):

8/8 said they were interested in France

8/8 said they knew more about France after the project

7/8 wanted to learn more about French culture, history and the language

5/8 said creating and performing the play was one of the things they enjoyed the most

All comments were positive.

Quotes (Appendix 8)

Miscellaneous:

Two children completed homework of their own accord about the French flag after the first lesson and wanted to present it to the class.

4. Discussion and conclusions for practice

The results show that through learning about the French Revolution, children improved their IU and showed motivation to learn more about France, its culture and its language. This provides support for Byram's (1997) ICC model in increasing IU (in Byram and Doyé, 2000). The increased motivation also shows support for the essential role of IU in language learning as outlined by Byram and Doyé (2000).

The support for 'savoir être' is crucial, it could be considered the foundation of IU; without having curiosity about and openness to other cultures, IU cannot occur. The strong evidence for 'savoir apprendre/faire' which involves acquiring new knowledge and using it in real-time communication suggests that using drama is a good way to engage with IU. This supports Even (2008) who conducted a study using drama pedagogy in modern foreign languages, finding higher levels of motivation and participation, a deeper understanding of subject matter and a more positive attitude towards modern foreign languages.

The results also provide support for Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory of learning. The children worked well in collaboration, building their knowledge together (as seen in the knowledge harvest) to create a play; my instruction was gradually substituted by the group's autonomous construction of learning content.

In light of these results, it is clear just how essential developing IU is for successful modern foreign language learning. The Nuffield Inquiry (Driscoll et al., 2013) concluded that despite its importance, IU is often not well planned for. As a result, developing respect for multiculturalism, broadening cultural horizons and promoting global citizenship do not happen; these are vital parts of the Key stage two languages curriculum (Great Britain. Department for Education, 2013). Therefore, it is essential that IU is taught in primary school and not seen as an optional extra or neglected in favour of teaching more vocabulary and grammar.

The enthusiasm and motivation the group showed as outlined in the results also support the assertion by Jones and Coffey (2013) that the main factors in successful language learning are enjoyment of languages, international awareness and enhanced understanding. This is in contrast to theories which favour children beginning language learning at a very young age as the most important factor, such as the critical period hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967 in Hurford, 1991). Learning a language is much more than just vocabulary competency, as the National Curriculum for language at Key stage two argues; it is an escape from insularity (Great Britain. Department for Education, 2013).

Learning about another culture can help children to explore their own and this is an important part of developing intercultural understanding (Byram and Doyé, 2000). In

the UK, classrooms are so diverse, and we owe it to the children to explore this richness in diversity.

5. Limitations and Next steps

The group all self-reported that they enjoyed the drama, but only one to two lessons were drama-focused. It would be interesting to see the impact on outcomes if each lesson was drama based. The questionnaire was only used to measure motivation for language learning at the end of the project. If it had been used at the beginning, a baseline measure could have been captured for motivation and used to compare levels before and after the project. The use of qualitative interviews with the group could have explored motivation further; capturing rich qualitative data. In relation to this, the inclusion criteria was a limitation as children who were enthusiastic about French were chosen. In order to measure any increase in motivation, it would have been better to have chosen less-engaged pupils. Due to time constraints, it was not possible to cover all five elements of the ICC model (Byram, 1997 in Byram and Doyé, 2000) in the same depth, therefore I had to be selective and reduce plans.

In conclusion, the next steps for developing intercultural understanding in modern foreign language learning are to plan effectively for it, making it a key part of teaching. A good way of doing this is to use a drama-based pedagogy and make use of topic-based learning to give the learning a clear theme. A drama-based pedagogy supports collaborative working, which is an essential element of successful learning in general.

References

Byram, M. & Doyé, P., (2000) "Intercultural competence and foreign language learning in the primary school" in *Teaching modern languages in primary schools* Driscoll, P. & Frost, D., (eds) pp.138-151, London, Routledge.

Cameron, L. (2001) Theme-based teaching and learning. *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*. Milton Keynes, Cambridge University Press, pp. 180–198.

Cremin, T., Mottram, M., Collins, R. and Powell, S. (2008) *Building Communities of Readers*. London:PNS/UKLA, p10

Department for Education (2013). *The National Curriculum in England. Key stages 1 and 2 framework document*. Available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/425601/PRIMARY_national_curriculum.pdf(Accessed: 21 October 2020).

Department for Education (2005). *Key stage 2 framework for languages*. Available at: <https://www.all-languages.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/KS2-Framework-for-Languages-part-1.pdf> (Accessed: 20 October 2020)

Driscoll, P, Earl, J & Cable, C (2013) The role and nature of the cultural dimension in primary modern languages, *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 26:2, 146-160

Even, S (2008) Moving in (To) Imaginary Worlds: Drama Pedagogy for Foreign Language Teaching and Learning *Die Unterrichtspraxis / Teaching German*, 41(2), pp. 161-170

Hurford, J. (1991) 'The evolution of the critical period for language acquisition', *Cognition*, 40, pp. 159-201

Jones. J and Coffey. S (2013) Starting early: what do young language learners do better? *Modern Foreign Languages 5-11 a guide for teachers* pp 4-13, Oxon, Routledge

Language Education (2012) *Language Education* [Online] Available at <http://languageeducation.pbworks.com/w/page/47700811/Intercultural%20Speakers> (15 October 2020)

Multilingual Performance Project (2016) Creative Multilingualism [Online]. Available at <https://www.creativeml.ox.ac.uk/resources/multilingual-drama-teaching-activities> (Accessed 22 October 2020)

Tyler-Mctighe, D (2020) Phonecall to Amy Lennon, January, 2020

Vygotsky, L. (1978) *Mind in Society. The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press.

Appendices

Appendix 1

The model of Intercultural Communicative Competence, Byram 1997 (in *Language Education*, 2012).

Savoir être
Intercultural attitudes

Curiosity, openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief of one's own.

Savoirs
Knowledge

Knowledge of social groups and their products and processes in one's own and one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction.

Savoir s'engager
Critical cultural awareness

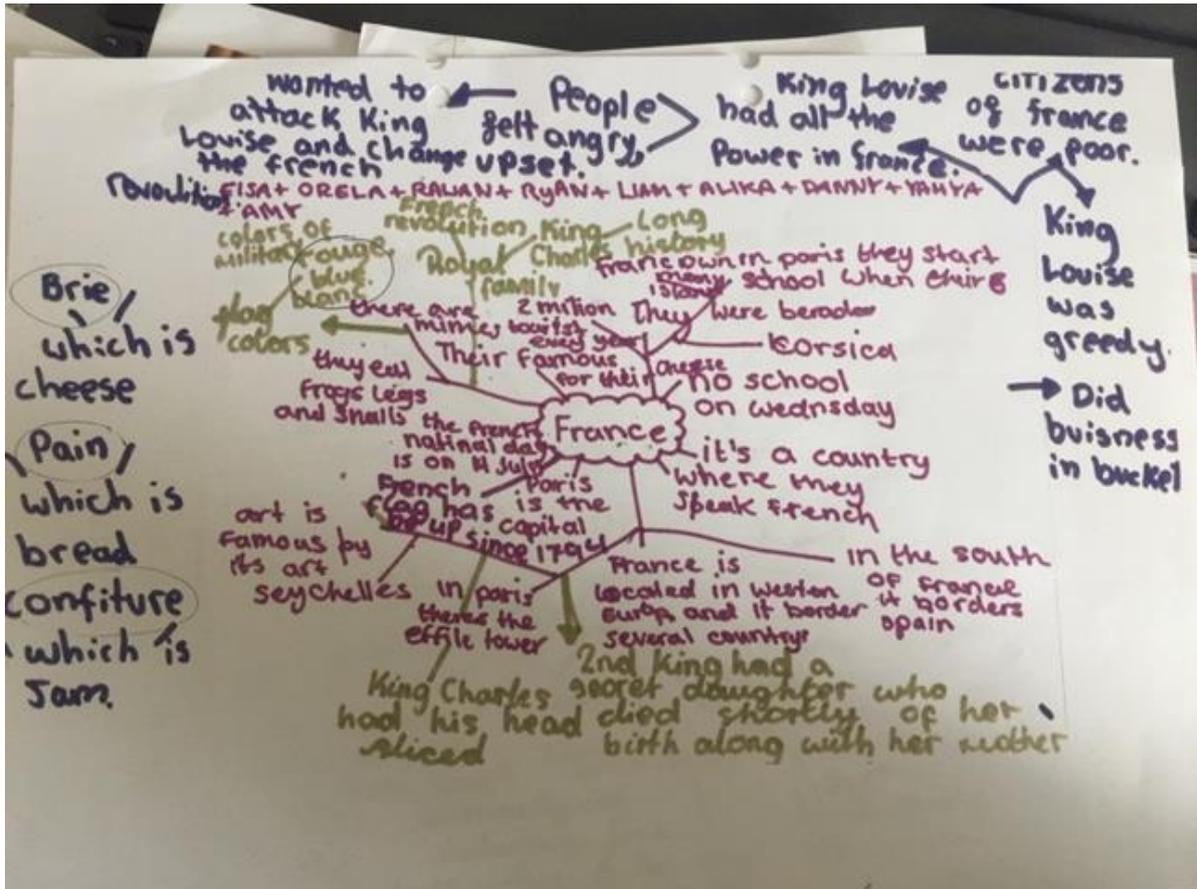
The ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries.

Savoir comprendre
Skills of interpreting and relating

The ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own.

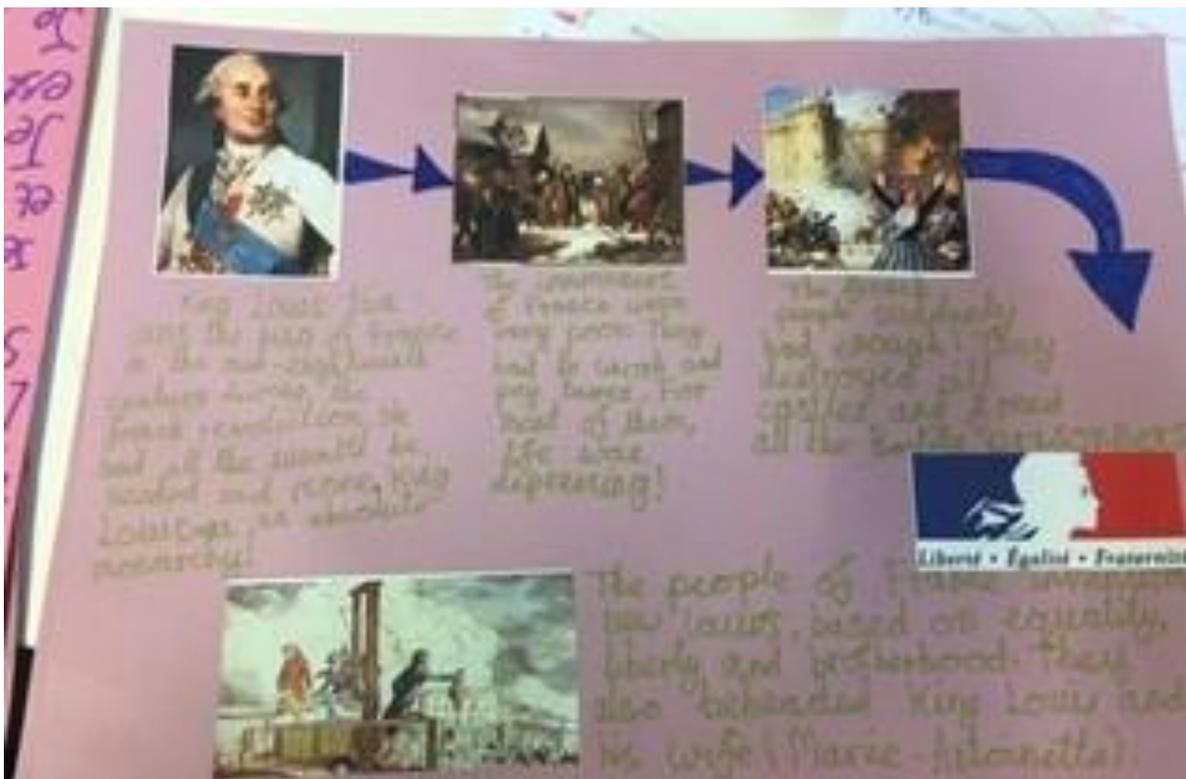
Savoir apprendre/faire
Skills of discovery and interaction.

ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.



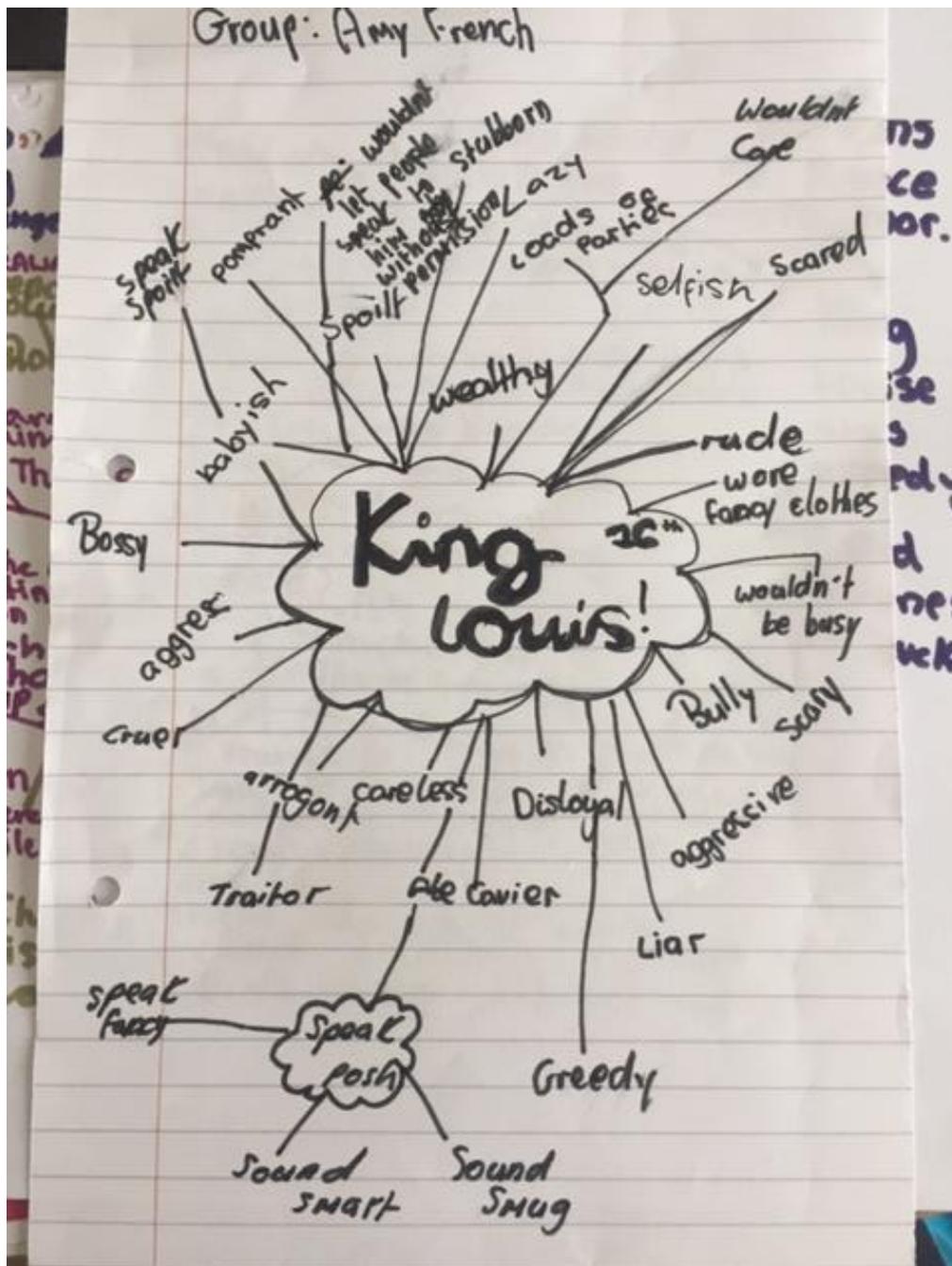
Appendix 4

French Revolution storyboard (week 3)



Appendix 5

Creating mind maps on key characters of the French Revolution



Appendix 6

Comparison of French and English flags, translated into French

Le drapeau français est bleu, rouge et blanc. C'est le drapeau français depuis 1794. Après la Révolution française. Le drapeau anglais est rouge et blanc mais pas bleu. Le croix rouge est le croix de Saint George.

