



Mantle of the Expert in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning: an Educational Challenge for Students' Language Skills Development

Georgia KOSMA¹

Abstract

Prior studies in the educational field have highlighted the effectiveness of the didactic use of drama inquiry based teaching approaches, such as Mantle of the Expert (MoE), in school settings. However, there is little research evidence as regards the didactic use of the specific approach in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning. As a result, the present paper examines the didactic use of the dramatic inquiry teaching approach of MoE in EFL learning with state primary school students in Greece. The study aims at exploring the use of MoE in EFL learning for the development of students' language skills in a manner compatible with the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (IFLC) as well as the CEFR A1-A2 communicative adequacy descriptors of the Council of Europe six-level language proficiency scale. In order to accomplish the purpose of the study, a six teaching hours action-research was implemented on 5th grade EFL state primary school students aged 10-11. A qualitative research approach through Content Analysis was implemented on the collected research data, from which very significant evidence was collected concerning the development of students' language skills in English. Research data provide strong indications that MoE constitutes an effective approach to learning English as a foreign language in primary education. Having proved MoE as a dynamic supplement to the mainstream teaching practice through this action research, the researcher suggests conducting the study to other age groups of both primary and secondary education as well as to more school contexts in other geographic areas.

Key Words: English as a Foreign Language, development of students' language skills, Mantle of the Expert, Action Research, Content Analysis

Introduction

The field of foreign language learning has undergone numerous changes on a global scale over the years. From the period when foreign language learning implied merely conquering the linguistic code we have come to the realization that the holistic approach to language learning presupposes viewing it not as a continuous process of new knowledge acquirement, rather as

¹ PhD in Theatre Pedagogy at the Department of Primary Education of Democritus University of Thrace, EFL state school teacher. E-mail: gkosma@eled.duth.gr & georgiakosma71@gmail.com. Orcid no: 0000-0002-1910-5406.

the means for achieving individual growth and forming congruous human relations. Towards this direction, the incorporation of drama methods in foreign language learning in general and EFL learning in particular is reported to be highly effective as far as reforming the teacher-student role is concerned (Florea, 2011 ; Jarayseh, 2010).

This section presents the current educational policy in EFL teaching in the Greek primary sector and the teaching approach applied in the study. The section begins with the discussion of the mainstream EFL teaching practice in primary school and is completed with the display of the dramatic teaching approach of MoE conceptual framework as well as recent research findings of the effectiveness of its didactic use in Efl learning.

The Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (IFLC)

The continuous developments of the European Union policy as regards foreign language school education as well as factors which emerged during the formation of foreign language in the Greek primary sector dictated the need of the formulation of an integrated curriculum for all foreign languages which are currently taught or may be taught at all sectors (Pedagogical Institute, 2011), an educational reform which took place in 2016 and is known as *Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum* (IFLC).

IFLC is structured on the basis of: a) critical literacy, which promotes the social consideration of language and seeks to develop students' critical ability (Pedagogical Institute, 2011) by means of working on authentic materials, b) the theory of New Learning, as presented in Kalantzis & Cope's (2008) pedagogical model. According to this model, which reflects the whole philosophy of MoE, learning in the school context constitutes a social process which takes place on the basis of inquiry and collaboration on the participants' part (youths and adults), as in real life.

IFLC aspires to develop students' positive attitude towards English through promoting their creative and critical ability, elements which are prerequisite for the dynamic presence of citizens in contemporary society. It is underpinned by the principles of the Communicative Approach and conceives language as a communication tool, useful to social behaviour (Chryshochoos, Chryshochoos & Thomson, 2002) because it introduces group work in administering issues through students' involvement in authentic communicative situations for projects elaboration as well as the inquiry process during new knowledge acquisition.

With this educational reform the EFL Curriculum is organized by language proficiency level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

communicative adequacy descriptors of the Council of Europe (2001) six-level language proficiency scale, as shown in table 1.

Table 1: CEFR Communicative Adequacy Descriptors of the Council of Europe Six-Level Language Proficiency Scale

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| A Basic User | <p>A1 Elementary knowledge</p> <p>A2 Basic knowledge</p> |
| B Independent User | <p>B1 Moderate knowledge</p> <p>B2 Good knowledge</p> |
| C Proficient User | <p>C1 Very good knowledge</p> <p>C2 Excellent knowledge</p> |

It is recommended that course books are not used by EFL teachers as exclusive teaching tools, rather as aid in designing a different curriculum for each class which is grounded on students' learning traits as well as IFLC and that lesson planning is based on differentiated instruction with the elaboration of teaching scenarios. Nonetheless, regarding the primary sector, which constitutes the focus of the present study, the effectiveness of IFLC in terms of upgrading the EFL educational process has not been scientifically proven confirmed, yet, as implied by the absence of relevant research findings.

Mantle of the Expert: theoretical foundation

MoE is a dramatic inquiry based teaching approach which uses fictional contexts in order to generate engaging, purposeful learning activities (Taylor, 2016). The approach should not be conceived as a cloak by which a person is recognized, rather as “a quality of leadership, carrying

standards of behaviour, morality, responsibility, ethics and the spiritual basis of all action” (Heathcote & Bolton, 1994, p.93). It is argued that “it is more than adopting a professional attitude to work. With MoE we can ensure that children are part of a community that is committed to the highest ethical standards” (Edmiston 2011, p. 225)

The conceptual framework of Mantle of the Expert is summarized by Edmiston (2011) in the following three tenets:

- 1) the joint participation of adults and children in the process of creating and exploring imaginary worlds
- 2) interdisciplinary research learning
- 3) the utilization of prior knowledge as well as students’ interests and attitudes.

In view of the aforementioned tenets, MoE aims at creating a learning process where students are given the opportunity to explore beneath the surface of things, examine facts in depth and experiment (Taylor, 2016). The approach presupposes drama representation for the creation of a fictional setting, which simulates reality (O’Neill, 1989). Within this setting, students assume a role of professional expertise. Their framing in dramatic role along with the research work assigned to them enable them develop behaviorally and gain empathy and the (Towel-Evans, 2007).

Heathcote and Bolton (1994) have identified the following six fundamental elements for Mantle of the Expert practice: *experts, enterprise, fictional context, commission, client, tensions*. None of these elements works in isolation. On the contrary, they are interrelated and combine with one another to influence learning. In fact, learning becomes an ongoing purposeful experience and takes place within a real-life context created by the teacher in order to capture children’s interest by asking the class to agree on a contract of make believe (Abbott, 2012).

Put it simply, MoE is about teachers and children acting as *experts* in an imaginary *enterprise* (Table 2), in the form of an inquiry community. This enterprise is set up in such a way that the issue under exploration is framed from a specific perspective. In this *fictional context* the challenge is to ensure that the children have something to explore rather than receive. The context is carefully set by the teacher so as to make sense to learners, who impersonate professionals who are very good at their job and master field knowledge, undertake a *commission* with a contractual element by an imaginary, usually prominent *client* through theatrical roles. The assignment is carefully designed by the teacher so as to generate activities and tasks that involve students in studying diverse areas of the curriculum (Heathcote &

Herbert, 1985) in order to complete an inquiry project under the teacher's guidance in authentic environments of collaborative action with concurrent personal responsibility of their actions (Papadopoulos, 2010b). The group's power increases through group action and the strength they draw from working towards a common goal. At some points various *tensions* arise on the learners' cognitive, emotional and intellectual level. These tensions either happen naturally or are caused intentionally by the teacher to keep learners cognitively, emotionally and intellectually engaged (Papadopoulos & Kosma, 2020).

Table 2: The 11 Categories of Enterprises in MoE

1. Servicing enterprises
2. Manufacture and Agriculture
3. Charity
4. Nurture
5. Regulations
6. Maintenance
7. Arts
8. Training
9. Research & Education
10. Animals & Wildlife
11. Personal services

MoE is underpinned by the principle that optimal learning presupposes students' relation to learning as experts rather than learners as viewed by the conventional school setting because in everyday life learning is conceived as the development of expertise through experiences (Edmiston, 2011).

As shown in figure 1, MoE design, application and evaluation are defined in a specific organizational model.

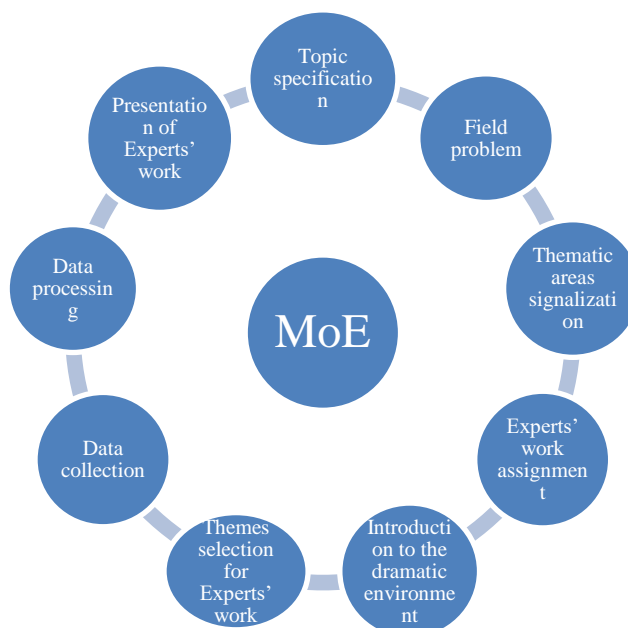


Figure 1: Organizational Model of MoE Application Stages (adapted from Papadopoulos, 2010a).

Students cease being passive recipients of information and become co-creators of meanings of an imaginary, yet at the same time real, community. Students' framing in dramatic role contributes to the development of their self-confidence and allows the approach of knowledge through self-efficacy (Fraser, Aitken & White, 2013) and internal mobilization, as they build new meanings experientially (O'Sullivan, 2011). Therefore, learning takes place as an evolution of expertise rather than as a transition to an unknown field (Taylor, 2016).

The recently growing body of research in the didactic use of MoE in foreign language learning in Greek compulsory education (Papadopoulos & Kosma, 2018, 2020) highlights how the specific teaching approach enables EFL students to become active agents in knowledge construction, develop intercultural awareness and accept otherness within the social community of the school classroom. The findings lie in accordance with results of related researches conducted worldwide (Huxtable, 2009; Edmiston & Whittaker, 2014; Swanson, 2016).

Method

The present study focuses on the implementation of a six teaching hours didactic intervention in the EFL curriculum of the 5th primary school grade by means of utilizing the MoE dramatic teaching approach. The research method applied in the didactic intervention was qualitative action research, in particular, the Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) model, according to which

each action research follows a cyclical process consisting of four steps (plan, action, observe, reflect). In our case, the study is designed in three different time phases featured by reflection and connection between previous and new data. This practically means that after completion of each circle follows reflection and design of the next circle on the basis of that reflection.

The choice of the specific research method was grounded on the following reasons which are included among the main features of action research:

1. Action research is conceived as a holistic problem-solving approach for the thorough comprehension of the condition under research (Hollingsworth, 1997).
2. Action research aims at changing the mainstream teaching practice (Burnaford, Fischer & Hobson, 1996), because it focuses on reframing and redesigning a teaching practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) by introducing an innovative approach to the current educational system.

Research objective

The objective of the study is to examine the use of the dramatic inquiry based teaching approach of MoE in English as a foreign language teaching for the development of students' language skills in a manner compatible with the IFLC as well as the CEFR A1-A2 communicative adequacy descriptors of the Council of Europe six-level language proficiency scale.

Participants and Study Field

A fifth grade class consisting of twenty two students (12 boys and 10 girls), aged 10-11, of the 1st Experimental Primary School of Alexandroupolis, Greece, participated in the study. Students were expected to be at CEFR A1 level as they had already been taught standard linguistic and grammar structures in the 4th grade. However, the participants comprised a mixed-ability class. Students' learning potential heterogeneity was measured by the teacher-researcher through the evaluation criteria in the Teacher's book progress tests provided by the Ministry of Education and revealed variation of competence in spoken as well as written reception, interaction and production. Greek was the mother tongue (L1) for all students.

As Drama Education was included in the school curriculum and the teacher-researcher applied drama techniques to her EFL teaching practice, students were already acquainted with *improvisation, role play, still image, thought detection* and *character outline*.

Students were not notified of the undergoing research, a decision which was based on the researcher's effort to deter making them feel as research subjects, thus minimizing the Hawthorn effect (Sedgwick & Greenwood, 2015).

The research was conducted during the third school term of the 2019-2020 school year within students' weekly schedule and lasted 6 teaching hours.

Data Collection Tools

The need for an in-depth interpretive approach to the aforementioned research objective dictated the joint use of the following data collection tools: observation, teacher's diary, students' diary, students' questionnaire, which, in the researcher's view, would ensure participants' unrestrained responses. It should be noted that as far as students' diary entries and questionnaire answers are concerned, the use of students' L1 was allowed as well, in the researcher's effort to facilitate weak students' engagement. Comments in students' L1 were translated in English at the researcher's responsibility so that they could be incorporated in the collected research data.

Research data were processed by means of qualitative *Content Analysis* (Berelson, 1954). In order to ensure research reliability and validity, it was decided to apply the method of *triangulation* which, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2005); Yin (2016), concerns the multiple crosschecking of research data collected by means of different data collection tools and is included in reliability and validity criteria of related scientific researches.

Observation

This tool was used in the form of open observation, which, according to Hopkins (2014), allows the recording of what is happening during the teaching-learning process. More specifically, the researcher recorded descriptively the actual actions and events taking place during the didactic intervention teaching-learning process.

Nonetheless, as there is no completely unstructured observation (Papadopoulou, 1999), the researcher constructed an observation key in order to facilitate the classification and transcription of the collected data (Table 3).

Table 3: Observation Key

| | | Always | Sometimes | Often | Hardly ever |
|---|------------------------------------|--------|-----------|-------|-------------|
| 1 | Students' engagement in activities | | | | |

| | | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|
| 2 | Students' collaboration within groups | | | | |
| 3 | Groups' cooperation | | | | |
| 4 | Students' spoken interaction in English | | | | |
| 5 | Students' written interaction in English | | | | |
| 6 | Expression of students' emotions | | | | |

Diary

Due to its reflective function, diary is considered to be an effective methodological tool for writing down cogitations and observations while conducting research (Ely, 1991). In the present study, the particular data collection tool was used as follows:

1. Throughout the research the teacher-researcher kept field notes on her experience of MoE application as well students' engagement in activities with regard to the research objective.
2. After each teaching period students anonymously kept field notes on their engagement in activities as well as their feelings.

Questionnaire

At the end of the research, students filled in an anonymous questionnaire which comprised of three open-ended questions. The reason for the choice of the particular data collection tool was the researcher's intention to provide students with the potential of expressing their opinions without constraints and justifying them based on their educational experience as people usually do in their everyday life (Geer, 1988).

The first question looked into students' viewpoint regarding the reception (spoken, written) of the target language during group work. The second question urged students to describe their feelings about interaction as well as production (spoken, written) of the target language during group work. The third question provided students with the opportunity to express their overall

impression of their experience as Experts and mention specific instances which they would prefer to have been different during their MoE experience.

Procedure

Students worked with MoE by means of a teaching scenario, titled *Summer traffic regulations in my city*. The scenario focused on the decision taken by the Quality of Life Committee of the Municipality of Alexandroupolis, a city in northeastern Greece, where students live, to ban traffic on the city coastal street every evening during summer months from 20:00 p.m. until 01:00 a.m. so that citizens can enjoy their walk in a car free area of the city.

On this particular occasion, the Mayor assigned to the traffic experts company, the commission of examining the traffic problems caused by the aforementioned decision and submitting a written report with suggestions on possible solutions.

1st teaching hour (45 min)

Stage 1 (Field problem)

The teacher draws students' attention by means of a brief video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGJGxdUoXGA> (2.34 min). Activation of students' prior knowledge is accomplished through teacher-students' reflective discussion about the traffic congestion in the city centre and the insufficiency in parking places due to the traffic ban on the coastal street in summer, during which students draw up related knowledge and formulate their viewpoints.

2nd teaching hour (45 min)

Stage 2 (Topic specification)

The teacher reads aloud a letter from the Mayor of Alexandroupolis to the class plenary. According to that letter, in an effort to effectively confront the traffic jam in the city centre and the insufficiency in parking places without depriving citizens from a *green* coastal street, the Mayor assigns to the traffic experts company, which teacher and students have established earlier, the task to mediate thoroughly on the present condition and propose alternative solutions. Moreover, through that letter, the teacher, who is considered to be the most experienced company member, undertakes the obligation to submit a written report to the city Mayor about the final outcome of the commission with the Experts' help (5 min).

Stage 3 (Thematic areas signalization)

After thorough discussion, teacher and students agree to undertake and carry out the

commission and signalize related themes, such as advantages and disadvantages as highlighted in the drivers' and the pedestrians' interviews on the issue under exploration, alternative car free location, shorter car ban duration etc. (20 min).

Stage 4 (Experts' work assignment)

The teacher presents and explicates the duties to be undertaken by each specialty of the Experts groups, such as consultants, engineers, constructors, cleaners, reporters (20 min).

3rd teaching hour (45 min)

Stage 5 (Introduction to the dramatic environment)

Students and teacher in role make their professional tags and decide on a company name (10 min).

Stage 6 (Themes selection for Experts' work)

Experts choose thematic areas on the basis of their role, such as citizens' interviews, city ground plan speculation, guard-rails and road signs replacement, road clean maintenance, tools supplies reserve (10 min).

Stage 7 (Data collection)

Students as Experts collect data from various sources on the Internet, under the teacher's guidance (25 min).

4th teaching hour (45 min)

Stage 8 (Data processing)

Experts make drawings of the problems for drivers and pedestrians resulting from the traffic ban. More importantly, they develop empathy through engagement in role plays and dramatizations using suitable drama techniques such as still image, thought detection, character outline, improvisation.

5th teaching hour (45 min)

Stage 9 (Presentation of Experts' work)

Experts present their work to the class plenary. The teacher in role prepares the relevant written report with the Experts' help.

6th teaching hour (45 min)

Stage 10 (Evaluation of Experts' work)

The teacher presents and reads aloud to the class plenary a letter, through which the

City Mayor expresses to the Experts' company his satisfaction for the successful completion of the assigned commission. The final stage is completed with the students' and teacher's joint reflection on the MoE experience by means of inquiry activities, such as questionnaire and artistic creations, such as depictions.

Findings

Qualitative data processing by means of Content Analysis offered useful pedagogic insight with regard to the following indicators:

1) developing students' language skills. This was achieved by fostering students' active engagement in intrinsically motivating learning activities adapted to their interests, needs and past experiences which, in turn, led to students' interaction in a friendly group atmosphere.

The positive effect of MoE on students regarding the development of their spoken as well as written reception, interaction and production in the target language was stressed in the teacher-researcher's observation key.

"As Experts, students had the opportunity to give oral directions in English during group work."

"They had written interaction and production in the target language while preparing the final report for the Mayor."

It was also stressed in her field notes:

"Students expanded their vocabulary in English while talking about their experiences related to the topic under exploration."

"They had spoken interaction and production in the target language because they negotiated on a variety of necessary steps to be taken such as designing the enterprise slogan."

This finding is also evident in the following comments from the students' diary entries:

"We talked in English about the traffic problems of our city." (Student 10)

"Trying to solve everyday problems is an interesting way to learn English." (Student 9)

"I'm excited because we are Experts. We talk and write in English about interesting things. We learn without the book! I love doing different things!" (Student 14)

"I love what we do. I feel free because I'm doing a research in English. It's very different from other school subjects. Now I see that I speak and write better." (Student 11)

2) promoting students' positive attitude towards EFL learning. This was accomplished by means of creating an authentic learning context which, in turn, enhanced students' multiple intelligence (Gardner, 1999). This finding is emphasized in the researcher's following diary entries:

"Students develop their interpersonal intelligence as they listen carefully to their classmates' opinions in groups."

"They contribute eagerly to group work on the basis of their abilities. They develop congruous communication."

"Students' commitment to the assigned commission is very obvious. They behave with responsibility which is indicative of the development of their intrapersonal intelligence."

"Students seem to have evolved understanding of the fictional context and ability to conceive imaginary images which were next expressed in visual creations/pictures. That is a sign of the activation of their spatial intelligence."

"Students have control of body movements while expressing their feelings during drama techniques, for instance still images, which is indicative of the growth of their bodily, kinesthetic intelligence."

Nonetheless, it is necessary to underline the following obstacle which emerged during the present study. Difficulty in spoken as well as written reception, interaction and production was highlighted by students with a low learning ability. Promotion of students' multiple intelligence, however, functioned decisively in maintaining their engagement in the learning process. This finding is evident in the following students' answers in the first and second questionnaire questions:

"I have some unknown words, but the teacher helps us. I feel great because I helped other Experts make their tags." (Student 20)

"I like it very much, but I don't speak English very well, so I don't understand everything. However, I love drawing the pictures that my team needs!" (Student 3)

This is also evident in the following students' quotes from their diaries entries:

"I would prefer to have translation, but I enjoy cooperating with the Mayor." (Student 22)

"In the beginning I was a bit stressed because I can't write good texts. Soon I realized that working for the Mayor is a unique experience. The other Experts helped me a lot." (Student 1)

The following quotes from students' answers to the third questionnaire question are indicative of what they would like to have been different while working on their assigned commission:

“We made a lot of noise. I didn’t like that. When our teacher told us that Experts don’t behave like that most students stopped.” (Student 17)

“We were very noisy.” (Student 2)

Results and Discussion

In view of the aforementioned findings, it is the researcher’s belief that the didactic use of MoE in EFL learning creates authentic environments which are fundamental to achieving optimal learning. The data derived from the present study are fully complying to research findings which highlight the efficacy of drama methods and techniques incorporation in foreign language learning in general and EFL learning in particular (Deesri, 2002 ; Huang & Shan, 2008).

In such environments education is less like a waiting room and more like a laboratory (Taylor, 2016). The approach fosters the idea *learn now-use now* as opposed to current mainstream teaching practices which are grounded on the idea *learn now-use later*. Thus, it becomes more clear how an alternative teaching approach can be provided to the primary school context that is grounded on more authentic, social and self-directed EFL learning, which fosters solving real-world problems.

There is no doubt that play is the real substance of life as it is particularly significant in the growth of the mind (Abbott, 2012). Bearing in mind that playing in the sense of undertaking roles is the infrastructure of Mantle of the Expert, it becomes clear that this approach instills a more positive attitude to learning.

In a nutshell, the present study made it clear that the didactic use of MoE in EFL learning has a multi dimensional impact on students which can be summarized as follows:

Mantle of the Expert:

- 1) fosters team dialogue and communication. Children come closer to each other as natural and dramatic characters. They are given the opportunity to interact and discuss with each other.
- 2) expands the cognitive and emotional basis of social learning as it creates environments which promote the social nature of learning.
- 3) encourages students’ cross curricular and interdisciplinary familiarizing with various subjects of the school curriculum. It allows them to explore all aspects of human experience and natural environment under professional consciousness terms. In this

way, they acquire the multiple angle experience which in turn enhances an open interpretation of reality (Papadopoulos, 2010a).

Suggestions

Although the findings of the present research are positive, it is important that the constraints of the study are discussed. Given the students' tight schedule, the study was a small scale one. This implies that a long scale study could have produced additional data processing which, in turn, would have led to more in-depth results. Additionally, as the study concerns primary school students, it is the researcher's estimation that its application to other age groups of both primary and secondary education is of particular interest. Furthermore, bearing in mind that the data in this study were collected and analyzed employing a small sample, the study could be replicated with a larger sample to either confirm or contrast the results. Finally, what is important for EFL teachers is a thorough training in the methodology of MoE, so that they are able to adapt their didactic practice on their students' experiences, interests and learning profile.

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