



The Effect of Drama Methods on Synchronous and Asynchronous Communication in the EFL Learning Context; the Mantle of the Expert Paradigm

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Abstract

The contribution of drama methods to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) acquisition has been the focal point of recent research. However, the effect of drama methods on distance EFL teaching has been scarcely investigated. This study examines by means of action research whether the dramatic inquiry based teaching method of *Mantle of the Expert* (MoE) has an impact on students' emotional engagement in synchronous and asynchronous EFL teaching. To this end, teacher's and students' journal entries along with teacher's observation notes and students' follow up questionnaire responses provided data for qualitative *Content Analysis*, with particular reference to students' motivation, linguistic productivity and self-regulation. The pilot project was implemented to 21 Greek-speaking students of the 6th primary school grade. The findings manifested that role framing through MoE exerted significant influence on students in terms of synchronous speaking practice, asynchronous writing practice and their empowerment in the learning process. In view of the research results, it is concluded that through the implementation of MoE in distance EFL teaching students are emotionally engaged in inquiry learning activities, become meaningfully productive in the target language and thus develop a positive attitude towards both the synchronous and asynchronous learning process.

Key words: distance EFL teaching; Mantle of the Expert; emotional engagement; self-regulation

Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools across the world were periodically forced to shut down during the 2019-2021 school years. In Greece, the educational process in all educational sectors was implemented by means of distance education which comprises of synchronous and asynchronous teaching. Regarding primary education, which is the focus of the present study,

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the following platforms were utilized, as suggested by the Greek Ministry of Education: *Webex* was employed for synchronous speaking practice. Asynchronous writing practice was elaborated through *e-me* and *e-class*. Neither teachers nor students had been previously trained in using these platforms. Consequently, both parties experienced additional stress in handling the overall unprecedented situation. In-service training was provided to teachers along the way, in the form of brief synchronous and asynchronous seminars. Sadly, students were not provided any training in the aforementioned platforms, which, at best, practically meant that students were dependent on the potential guidance of their family.

In general, the focus of research on online education is on either teaching effectiveness or the comparison of an online course to its counterpart (Shire, Worthman, Shih & Kasari, 2020). Further, the focal point of studies in offline education is often course expectations (Mupinga, Nora & Yaw, 2006) and course satisfaction (Garnjost & Lawter, 2019), but only now amid COVID-19 do we have the opportunity to explore students' emotional engagement in a fully distance learning context.

In this framework, the study addresses this research deficiency by adopting a holistic approach to distance EFL teaching. This entails stimulation of students' motivation and increase of their emotional engagement in the learning process which, in turn, results in enhancing their self-regulation and course satisfaction.

Synchronous and Asynchronous Teaching in Distance Education

Synchronous teaching and asynchronous teaching constitute the two main approaches in distance education. Synchronous teaching refers to the use of virtual applications which enable live connections between teacher and students and resemble classroom instruction (Bernard et al., 2004). According to the authors, in asynchronous teaching there is a time interval between teaching and learning. Put it simply, synchronous teaching is featured by online interaction between participants in real time whereas asynchronous teaching is characterized by participants' longer exposure to learning input and reflection (Khodaparast & Ghafournia, 2015).

There exists a considerable body of research on the positive impact of utilizing synchronous and asynchronous learning environments in enhancing students' self-regulation and course satisfaction. Research data highlight the effectiveness of the combination of more modalities in virtual learning environments than those employed in the actual classroom for the development of meaningful oral and written proficiency in foreign language (Kato, Spring & Mori, 2016;

Payne & Whitney, 2002). Interestingly, despite its more excellent implementation, compared to asynchronous teaching, as regards young learners, which is the focal point of the present study, it is argued that the structure of synchronous teaching should be better suited to students' need for immediate guidance and feedback (Bernard et al., 2004).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic the physical unavailability of teacher and students was regarded as an essential cause of concern (Ory & Bullock, 1997) because both approaches of distant education are defined as "a poorer-quality replication of classroom instruction" (Bernard et al., 2004, p.408). According to Harasim, Hiltz, Teles & Turoff, (1995), the lack of physical presence in asynchronous teaching, in particular, is considered as a factor for lower learning results, as compared to synchronous teaching. Students' course satisfaction is associated merely with learning outcomes (Nortwig, Petersen & Balle 2018; Zimmerman, 2002) rather than students' emotional engagement in the learning process. Interestingly, relevant research evidence on the advantages and disadvantages of synchronous and asynchronous teaching amid COVID-19, is growing further (Bailey, Almusharraf & Hatcher, 2020; Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear & Koole, 2020).

Mantle of the Expert: Theoretical Framework

MoE is a dramatic inquiry based teaching method which uses fictional contexts in order to generate engaging, purposeful learning activities. It is argued that MoE is not a cloak by which a person is recognized, rather "a quality of leadership, carrying standards of behaviour, morality, responsibility, ethics and the spiritual basis of all action" (Heathcote & Bolton, 1994, p. 93). 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.

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 enables them to develop behaviorally and gain empathy (Towel-Evans, 2007).

According to Heathcote and Herbert (1985), MoE is about teachers and students acting as *experts* in an imaginary *enterprise*, 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 students have something to explore rather than receive. The context is carefully set by the teacher so as to make sense to students, who impersonate professionals and undertake a *commission* with a contractual element by an imaginary, usually prominent *client* through drama roles. At some points various *tensions* arise on the students' cognitive, emotional and intellectual level. These tensions either happen naturally or are caused intentionally by the teacher to keep students cognitively, emotionally and intellectually engaged (Papadopoulos & Kosma, 2020). The group's power increases through group action and the strength they draw from working towards a common goal. MoE is underpinned by the principle that optimal learning presupposes students' relation to learning as experts rather than students, 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.

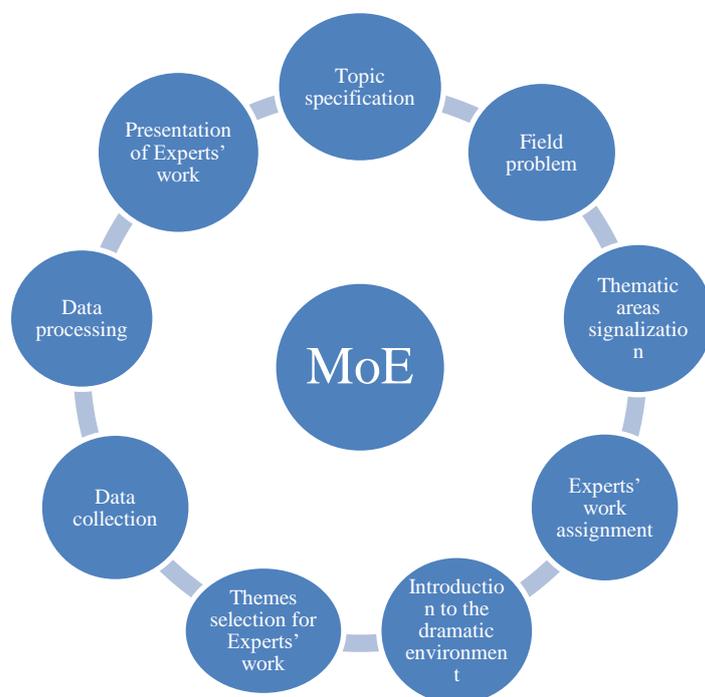


Figure 1: Organizational Model of MoE Application Stages (adapted from Papadopoulos, 2010)

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 growing body of research findings demonstrates the effectiveness of the incorporation of drama methods, in general, in EFL learning (Florea, 2011; Miccoli, 2003) and MoE, in particular (Kosma 2019; Papadopoulos & Kosma, 2018), with regard to enhancing students' emotional engagement in the learning process, as they transform the learning context into "a low risk environment" (Cooper & Dever, 2001, p. 60) where students use the target language meaningfully and thus effectively.

Method

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). On a practical level, this means that the study was designed in three different time phases featured by reflection and connection between previous and new data, a process which enabled the researcher reflect on the difficulties observed and recorded during the intervention so as to redesign certain parts of it. The choice of action research played a catalytic role in the study indeed, as it allowed adaptation to the specific conditions and did not move in a detailed outline binding the researcher in predetermined activities (Hopkins, 2014).

Research Objective

The study aims at investigating the feasibility of integrating the dramatic inquiry based teaching method of MoE and distance EFL teaching as regards enhancing students' emotional engagement in the learning process.

The research was grounded on the following three research questions:

- 1) Does MoE role framing in distance EFL teaching stimulate students' motivation in oral practice in the target language?
- 2) Does MoE role framing in distance EFL teaching enhance students' motivation in written communication in the target language?
- 3) Does MoE role framing in distance EFL teaching develop students' self-regulation?

Participants and Study Field

The study was implemented to a sixth grade class consisting of twenty one students aged 11-12 years old, ten boys and eleven girls, of the 1st Experimental Primary School of Alexandroupolis, Greece. Greek was students' mother tongue (L1). All students had been learning EFL for six years in that school setting. The class consisted of students with linguistic diversity in EFL in both receptive (reading and listening) and productive (writing and speaking) skills. Students' linguistic diversity, in terms of their different English language levels, was measured by the teacher/researcher through the evaluation criteria in the Teacher's book progress tests provided by the Ministry of Education at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year.

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 so that the feeling of study objects could be avoided, thus minimizing the Hawthorn effect (Sedgwick & Greenwood, 2015).

The study was carried out through a didactic intervention in the EFL curriculum of the 6th primary school grade by means of utilizing the MoE dramatic inquiry based teaching approach. The didactic intervention was conducted during the first term of the 2020-2021 school year in the context of students' distance learning weekly schedule, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with a total duration of fifteen synchronous and asynchronous teaching hours. The teacher/researcher adapted part of a unit of the school course book which is used for EFL teaching in the sixth grade and is provided by the Ministry of Education. A multi-sensory approach to distance EFL teaching was adopted on the basis of the topic introduced by the specific unit. In this respect, visual, auditory and kinesthetic elements were combined in online and offline problem solving activities which were designed on the basis of modern trends to foreign language teaching and stimulated the development of students' multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1999).

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 journal, students' journal, students' follow up questionnaire, which, in the researcher's view, would ensure participants' unrestrained responses. The aforementioned data sources were used by the

researcher as a baseline to determine students' motivation, emotional engagement and learning gains. It should be noted that students were allowed to use their mother tongue (L1) both in their journal entries and their questionnaire responses in the researcher's effort to facilitate weak students' engagement. On a similar basis, the questionnaire questions were translated by the researcher in students' mother tongue so as to prevent potential misunderstandings. Comments in students' L1 were translated in English at the researcher's responsibility so that they could be incorporated in the collected research data.

The researcher's prime concern with the present research project was to attempt a small scale intervention (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2013). The collected 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 technique of triangulation (Somekh 1983) through the intersection of a variety of data (Elliott, 1991). There was no interest in ensuring that the intervention was successful in reaching the research objective. On the contrary, the researcher wished to highlight all research constraints so that other researchers could take them under consideration in their future applications.

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.

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 2).

Table 2: Observation Key

		Always	Sometimes	Often	Hardly ever
1	Experts' motivation in synchronous speaking activities				
2	Experts' motivation in asynchronous writing activities				
3	Experts' self-regulation in the distance learning process				
4	Expression of students' emotions				

Journal

Due to its reflective function, journal 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 synchronous and asynchronous learning activities with regard to the research objective.
2. After completion of each research cycle, students kept field notes on their engagement in synchronous speaking activities, asynchronous writing activities as well as their feelings. They were asked to upload their journal entries on e-me and were reassured that only the teacher would have access to their files.

Questionnaire

By completion of the research, students filled in a follow up 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 (Bee & Murdoch-Eaton, 2016).

The first question looked into students' viewpoint regarding their motivation in synchronous speaking activities as Experts. The second question urged students to describe their feelings about their motivation in asynchronous writing activities as Experts. The third question provided students with the opportunity to express their feelings about their empowerment during the distance learning process as Experts.

Procedure

For the implementation of the didactic intervention a whole course book unit was redesigned by the teacher/researcher. More specifically, a teaching scenario, titled *Our fight against the COVID-19 pandemic*, was designed on the basis of the action research three circles. The scenario focused on the decision taken by the Greek Prime Minister to intensify state efforts to convince citizens about the importance of keeping social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. On this particular occasion, the Prime Minister assigned to the consultants experts company, the commission to organize a campaign and present a final written report.

1st-4th teaching hours (synchronous teaching)

Stage 1 (Field problem)

The teacher draws students' attention by means of related audiovisual stimuli. Activation of prior knowledge is accomplished through teacher-students' reflective discussion as regards their opinion on social distancing during which students draw up personal experience and formulate their viewpoints.

Stage 2 (Topic specification)

The teacher reads aloud a letter from the Prime Minister to the class plenary. According to that letter, in an effort to intensify state efforts to convince citizens about the importance of keeping social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic the Prime Minister assigns to the consultants experts company, the task to mediate thoroughly on the current state and come up with a report with suggestions on the issue. 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 Prime Minister about the final outcome of the commission with the Experts' help. Students are introduced to the fictional context. A fictional company/responsible team with a common goal is set up. Students are role framed as Experts of a fictional team. The commission is assigned by the external agent to students-as-experts and is reviewed. Teacher and students agree to operate in-role. Students are told that the teacher will have a double role acting both as their colleague and as the client representative as well which is consistent with the principles of MoE (Swanson 2017).

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 interviewing citizens of different age groups, making posters, composing a song, recording a video advertisement etc.

Stage 4 (Experts' work assignment)

The teacher presents and explicates the duties to be undertaken by each specialty of the Experts groups, such as reporters, painters, singers, musicians etc.

5th-10th teaching hours (synchronous-asynchronous teaching)

Stage 5 (Introduction to the dramatic environment)

Teacher and students in-role make their professional tags and decide on a company name.

Stage 6 (Themes selection for Experts' work)

Experts choose thematic areas on the basis of their role.

Stage 7 (Data collection)

Experts are given background knowledge. Depending on the commission needs, they collect data from various Internet sources. Students upload their files on e-me.

Stage 8 (Data processing)

Students are engaged in collaborative activities. They make drawings of their experiences as regards keeping social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. More importantly, they develop further empathy through imagining what a typical day of a citizen in the future after the COVID-19 pandemic would be like or a particular event that he/she could experience and make relevant presentations using suitable drama techniques, such as still image, role play, improvisation. Moreover, students draw pictures, make digital comics/stories and write a final report in the target language. They upload their files on e-me.

11th-13th teaching hours (synchronous-asynchronous teaching)

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 and uploads it on e-me.

14th-15th teaching hours (synchronous-asynchronous teaching)

Stage 10 (Evaluation of Experts' work)

The teacher presents and reads aloud to the class plenary a letter, through which the Prime Minister expresses to the Experts' company his satisfaction for the successful completion of the assigned commission. The final stage is completed with the teacher's and students' joint reflection on their MoE experience by means of inquiry activities, such as follow up questionnaire and artistic creations, such as depictions which are uploaded on e-me.

Findings

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

1) developing students' speaking skills. This was achieved by students' role framing as Experts in motivating learning activities, adapted to their interests, needs and past experiences which, in turn, led to students' synchronous interaction in a non-threatening learning context. The positive effect of MoE on the development of students' spoken interaction and production in the target language was stressed in the teacher/researcher's observation key:

"As Experts, students had the opportunity to practice their speaking skills during our Webex meetings."

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 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 keeping safe during COVID-19.” (Student 20)

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

“I’m excited because we are Experts. We talk in English about interesting things. We learn without the book! I love doing different things!” (Student 4)

“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 better.” (Student 21)

2) developing students’ writing skills. This was accomplished by students’ role framing as Experts in motivating asynchronous writing activities. This finding is revealed in the following researcher’s quotes:

“They practiced writing in the target language while writing paragraphs about themselves and preparing the final report for the Prime Minister.”

Students expressed their enjoyment for their involvement in the asynchronous writing activities.

This is stressed in students’ answers to the second questionnaire question:

“I enjoyed writing COVID-19 safety tips.” (Student 12)

“We wrote a report for the Prime Minister about keeping safe during the pandemic. It was very interesting.” (Student 19)

“I enjoyed writing about my life in future after COVID-19.” (Student 3)

3) enhancing students’ commitment towards successful completion of the assigned commission. Students’ new identity as Experts made them feel more important and useful. This, in turn, increased their self-regulation. They particularly liked the fact that they were given the opportunity to negotiate with their classmates and plan their work. In their journals and replies to the questionnaire students said that working without the school course book was strange but interesting. They confessed it gave them a greater feeling of freedom and responsibility for their learning.

This is confirmed by the following students’ comments in their journals and replies to the third questionnaire question:

“I was impressed because we learnt without the book! I felt very free.” (Student 13)

“What I like most is that we are responsible for a commission. We have never done that before.” (Student 16)

“All Experts in my class are proud of our success!” (Student 6)

“I’m very satisfied with my performance during the project.” (Student 2)

In view of the aforementioned findings, it appears that the results confirmed at large our research objective and research questions. Research data provide strong evidence that the didactic use of MoE in distance EFL teaching creates authentic environments which are fundamental to achieving optimal synchronous and asynchronous learning. In such environments education is less like a waiting room and more like a laboratory (Taylor, 2016). Thus, it becomes clear how an alternative teaching method, which is grounded on authentic and self-regulated learning and fosters solving real-world problems, can be incorporated in distance EFL teaching.

The confirmation of the research questions affirms that MoE fosters students' emotional engagement in learning activities which enflame their imagination and motivation to learn. This, in turn, results in students' empowerment and self-regulation. The findings of this study revealed the benefits of integrating MoE in the distance EFL learning context, fully complying to studies which highlight the efficacy of drama methods incorporation in distance learning (Şahin & Han, 2020; Yang, 2011).

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study revealed the benefits of integrating MoE in distance EFL learning contexts, fully complying to research findings which highlight the efficacy of drama methods and techniques incorporation in foreign language learning (Deesri, 2002; Huang & Shan, 2008). As the teacher is now seen as a facilitator of knowledge rather than as a transmitter of it, the didactic use of MoE allows students to explore all aspects of human experience and natural environment under professional consciousness terms. In this way, they acquire a multiple angled experience which in turn fosters an open interpretation of reality.

In view of the aforementioned findings, it is the researcher's belief that the didactic use of MoE in distance EFL learning creates authentic environments which are fundamental to achieving optimal learning. Bearing in mind the argument that human nature seeks motivation in direct pleasure, in what is interesting (Dewey, 1956), it appears that the dramatic inquiry based teaching method of MoE is a dynamic supplement to distance EFL teaching. It can replace outdated traditional exercises which repeat grammatical structures and mechanical vocabulary drilling exercises. In MoE knowledge construction is situational and purposeful and thus internalized and meaningful.

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 MoE, it becomes clear that this teaching method instills a more positive attitude to distance learning. The didactic use of MoE in distance EFL teaching has a multi dimensional impact on students as it fosters team dialogue and communication. Through their role framing as Experts, students are given the opportunity for meaningful synchronous spoken and asynchronous written interaction in the target language. Additionally, MoE expands the cognitive and emotional basis of social learning as it creates student friendly virtual environments which promote the social nature of EFL learning and enhance students' self-regulation.

In a nutshell, MoE opens up new possibilities for EFL educators to support learning more efficiently in virtual environments. Through their role framing as Experts, students are involved in learning activities that are productive, engaging and enjoyable. Thus, the research results indicate that drama methods, in general, and MoE in particular, have a key role in the distance EFL learning process. MoE promotes active self-regulated learning. It requires from students to take responsibility for their learning, which in turn enhances their self-confidence, as this responsibility is based on the power of their growing field expertise. This becomes particularly essential when we consider that these skills and qualities are critical in current society to promote lifelong reflective citizens.

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 educators is a thorough training in the methodology of MoE, so that they are able to adapt their distance didactic practice on their students' experiences, interests and learning profile.

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