Drama methods in reforming the teacher-student role in foreign language learning: an action research through Mantle of the Expert

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Abstract: The recently growing body of research findings highlights the efficacy of drama methods and techniques incorporation in foreign language learning. The present study examines the developing synergy between a drama method and the current curriculum for English as a Foreign Language(EFL) learning in Greek primary education. The article reports on the emergent findings from a qualitative action research implemented to the EFL learners of a 5th grade primary state school in Greece, through the drama method of *Mantle of the Expert*(MoE). Research data demonstrate improvement of the learning process as derived from students' active engagement, along with development of teacher-student effective collaboration in the co-construction of new knowledge. The article argues for the social role of MoEas a means of transforming EFL learning into anon competitive experiential processs which, in turn, results in the teacher-student role enrichment. It is our estimation that EFL teachers could benefit from the present study findings as the latter constitute flexible suggestions for upgrading their teaching practice.

Keywords :teacher-student role, foreign language learning, Mantle of the Expert, action research

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 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 (Jarayseh, 2010·Florea, 2011).

1. 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 have emerged during the formation of foreign language teaching in the Greek primary sector dictated the need for 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, 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 aims at developing students' critical ability (Pedagogical Institute, 2011) by means of working on authentic materials, b) the theory of New Learning, as presented in Kalantzis and Cope's (2008) pedagogical model. According to this model, which reflects the whole philosophy of MoE, learning in the school context consists a social process that takes place on the basis of inquiry and collaborationon 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. Itisunderpinned by the principles of the Communicative Approach and conceives language as a communication tool, useful to social behaviour (Chryshochoos, Chryshohoos & Thomson, 2002) as it introduces: a) group work in administering issues through students' involvement in authentic communicative situations for projects elaboration, b) the inquiry process during new knowledge acquisition.

In view of this educational reform, the EFL Curriculum is organized by language proficiency level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages 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 (Council of Europe, 2001)

A Basic User	**A1** Elementary knowledge **A2** Basic knowledge
B IndependentUser	**B1** Moderate knowledge **B2** Goodknowledge
C Proficient User	**C1** Very good knowledge **C2** Excellent knowledge

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.

2. Mantle of the Expert: Conceptual 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, 1994:93). On a similar basis Edmiston points out that the method "*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: 225). The conceptual framework of Mantle of the Expert is summarized by the author 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 presupposesdrama representation forthecreationofafictional setting, which simulates reality (O'Neill, 1989). Withinthissetting, studentsassume a role of professionalexpertise. Their framing in dramatic role along with the research work assigned to them enable themto developbehaviorallyandgainempathyand the (Towel-Evans, 2007).

Put it simply, MoEis about teachers and students 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 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 theatrical roles. The assignmentis 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 settings 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 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).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.
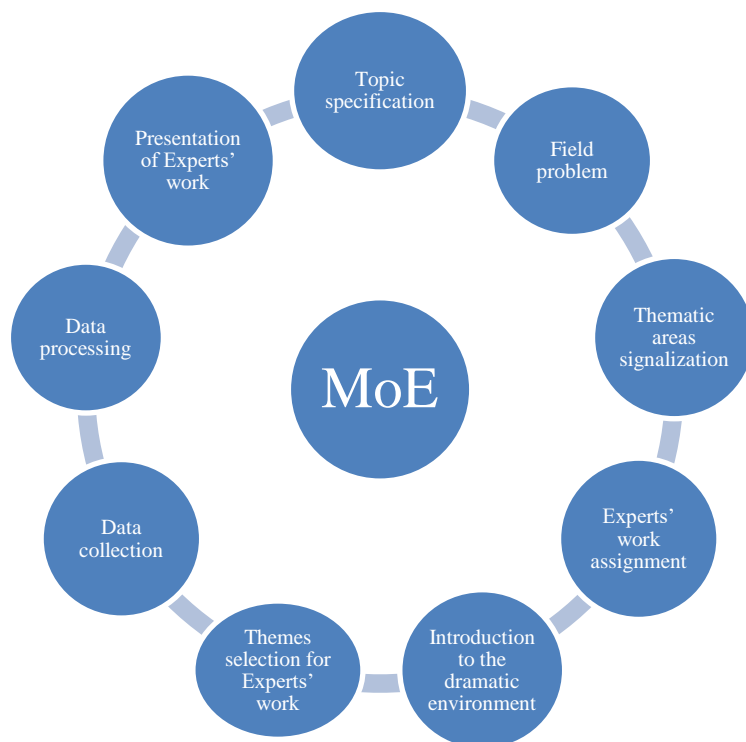

Figure 1: Organizational Model of MoE Application Stages (adapted from Papadopoulos, 2010a)

Students cease being passive recipients of information and become co-creators of meanings of an imaginary, yet 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 method enables EFL learners 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).

3. Research objective/research questions

Thestudy aims at investigating the feasibility of integrating the dramatic inquiry based teaching method of MoE and EFL learning in the school setting in a manner compatible with the IFLC curriculum as regards reforming the teacher-student role.

The research was grounded on the following three research questions:

1) Does the integration of the dramatic teaching method of Mantle of the Expert in the EFL learning process enhance students' active engagement in the learning process?

2) Does the integration of the dramatic teaching method of Mantle of the Expert in the EFL learning process improve collaboration among students?

3) Does the integration of the dramatic teaching method of Mantle of the Expert in the EFL learning process improve collaboration between teacher and students?

4. Participants and study field

One fifth grade class of the 1st Experimental Primary School of Alexandroupolis, Greece participated in the research. As indicated by the IFLC (Pedagogical Institute, 2011), students were expected to be at CEFR A1 level. However, it was a mixed ability class featured by students' competence heterogeneityin oral and written speech comprehension and production. Students' EFL learning heterogeneitywas measured by the researcher,who was also their EFL teacher, through the evaluation criteria in the Teacher's book progress tests provided by the Ministry of Education.

The class consisted of 21 students in total (10 boys and 11 girls) aged 10-11. Greek was students' mother tongue (L1). As Drama Education was included in the school curriculum and the students' teacher 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 objectscould be avoided,thus minimizing the Hawthorn effect (Sedgwick & Greenwood, 2015).

5. Research Method

The present study focuses on the implementation of a nine 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 was conducted during the third term of the 2019-2020 school year inthe context of students' weekly schedule.The study was designed in three different time phases featured by reflection and connection between previous and new data.

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).

The choice of the particular research method was based on reasons which constitutesome of the prime traits of action research. More particularly, the study of a specificeducational situation by means of action research:

1. is a form of reflective inquiry (Carr & Kemmis 1986), which aims at actionquality improvement from within (Elliott 1991).

2. constitutes a flexible implementation context which is adaptable to theparticular needs of each research (Hopkins,2014).

3. offers an appropriate methodological context for the implementation ofinnovative teaching practices because educational innovation is not imposedas a product designed by external factors and presented on teachers in itsfinal form, rather it is subject to a continuous and repetitive comprehension,improvement and evaluation process (Rudduck & Hopkins, 1985).

In our case, the choice of action research played a catalytic role in our study indeed, as it allowed adaptation to the specificconditions and did not move in a detailed outline binding the researcher inpredetermined activities (Hopkins,2014).

6. Procedure

In order to carry out the aforementioneddidactic intervention a whole course bookunit was redesigned by the researcher. The didactic intervention requirements were met by designing a teaching scenario, titled*Invitation to a city council*, on the basis of the action research three circles. The scenario focused on the decision taken by the Mayor of Alexandroupolis, a city in northeastern Greece, where students live, tocall a city council meeting as regards the protection of the natural environmentand the state of cleanliness within the city district.

On this particular occasion, the Mayor assigned to the consultans experts company, the commission of examining the state of greenery and cleanliness in the city district and submitting to the city council a written report with suggestions on the specific issues.

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=uhfRdpmOZkE&ab_channel=ThrakinetTVChannel(1.41 min). Activation of prior knowledge is accomplished through teacher-students' reflective

discussion about the state of cleanliness in the city 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 toimprove the state of cleanliness in the city, the Mayor assigns to the consultants experts company, which teacher and students have established earlier, the task to mediate thoroughly on the present condition and come up 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 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 examining sufficiency as well as state of recycling bins, 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 cleaners, agriculturists, gardeners, consultants,reporters (20 min).

3rd teaching hour (45 min)

Stage 5 (Introduction to the dramatic environment)

Teacher and students 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 city ground plan speculation, citizens' interviews, rubbish bins replacement, greenery preservation, equipment/tools suppliesreserve (10 min).

Stage 7 (Data collection)

Students as Experts collect data from various Internetsourcesunder the teacher's guidance(25 min).

4th teaching hour (45 min)

Stage 8 (Data processing)

Experts make drawings of the problems for citizens resulting from the current state of cleanliness in the city. More importantly, theydevelop empathy through engagementin 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 teacher's and students'joint reflection on the MoE experience by means of inquiry activities, such as questionnaire and artistic creations, such as depictions.

7. Data collection means

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 ensureparticipants' unrestrained responses. It should be noted that as far as students' diary entries and questionnaire answers are concerned, the use of students' mother tongue (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 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(Denzin &Lincoln, 2005; Yin, 2016).

7.1.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 transcriptionof the collected data(table 2).

Table 2: Observation Key

		Always	Sometimes	Often	Hardly ever
1	Students' engagement inactivities				
2	Students' collaboration within groups				
3	Groups' collaboration				
4	Teacher-students' collaboration				
5	Expression of students' emotions				

7.2. 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.

7.3. 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 theirengagement in activities. The second question urged students to describe their feelings about their interaction with their classmates during group work. The third question provided students with the opportunity to express their feelings about their cooperation with their teacher.

8. Results

Qualitative data processing revealed that through their active interaction as dramatic characters while keeping their personal identity at the same time, students worked as co-researchers and co-creators of the teaching-learning process. The result of this, in turn, was that they became actively engaged, they came closer to their classmates and developed collaboration with their teacher as well. Qualitative data processing by means of Content Analysis offered useful pedagogic insight with regard to the following indicators:

1. promoting students' active engagement in the educational process through their Expert framing. Despite their initial surprise, students were soon framed as Experts. The positive effect of MoE on students is stressed in the researcher's following diary entries:

"*At first most students were observed to be surprised and challenged, however, they soon accepted their new imaginary roles.*"

"*Their new identity as Experts fostered students' involvement in the activities.*"

Students' new identity as Experts made them feel more important and useful. This, in turn, increased their eagerness to group work in order to carry out the assigned commission successfully. Their imaginary, yet realistic, roles enhanced their self-esteem and fostered their self-confidence. Project completion gave students a feeling of pride and satisfaction. They even expressed their desire to keep their Expert identity in more school subjects. The following quotes from students' diaries and questionnaire answers are indicative of their feelings:

"*I feel like a real Expert! It's great!*" (Student 10)

"*We are real Experts because we have our own company!*" (Student 20)

"*I am excited because we have to carry out a real task!*" (Student 2)

"*I am thrilled because we cooperate with the Mayor! We mustn't disappoint him.*" (Student 6)

"*I am very proud because I'm trying to help my city! I don't want the project to finish.*" (Student 21)

"*Let's be Experts in more school subjects!*" (Student 1)

2. creating a cooperative atmosphere among students.This is evident in the following students' quotes from their diaries and questionnaire answers:

"*I like working with other Experts!*" (Student 3)

"*I am very happy because I work with other professionals.*" (Student 19)

"*Classes are more interesting because now I cooperate with other students.*" (Student 4)

It is also emphasized in the researcher's following diary entries:

"*Working in groups as Experts students developed intimacy with each other.*" "*Students' behaviour to one another during group work seems to be more responsible now.*"

"*They discovered new partners. This increased their learning interest.*"

3. developing collaboration between teacher and students. This is evident in the students' quotes from their questionnaire answers and diary entries:

"*I love working with my teacher on this project.*" (Student 5)

"*My teacher and I are great Experts. We should do this more often!*" (Student 13)

"*It'sthe first time my teacher and I have a company and we help our city.*" (Student 15)

It is also highlighted in the following researcher's diary entry:

"*Learners are observed to be collaborating effectively with the teacher while working in role.*"

From the above it appears that the results confirmed at large our research objective and research questions. Nonetheless, we consider it necessary to underline the following difficulties which arouse during the present study:

1. In order to facilitate group work seating arrangements were necessary to be made, a process which proved out to be quite noisy.

2. Time insufficiency obliged the teacher/researcher twice to ask students to remain in the classroom during break time in order to complete their work in progress. That was not agreeably accepted by all students.

These findings are evident in the following students' replies in the first questionnaire question:

"*There was a lot of noise when we moved in order to work in our groups.*" (Student 16)

"*When the teacher asked us to continue working during break time, I hated it.*" (Student 18)

Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed the benefits of integrating MoE in primary school 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).

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. As the teacher is now seen as a facilitator of knowledge rather than as a transmitter of it, the teacher-studentrole is reformed because their relationship becomes more trusting and dialogic.

Bearing in mind the argument that human nature seeks motivation in direct pleasure, in what is interesting (Dewey, 1956), it appears that the didactic use of MoE in EFL learning is a dynamic supplement to the current teaching practice as dictated by IFLC. 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 MoE knowledge construction is situational and purposeful and thus internalized and more meaningful as opposed tothe current mainstream teaching practice.

In a nutshell, the present study made it clear that the didactic use of MoE in EFL learning has a multi dimensional effecton students as it:

1) creates a cooperative atmosphere between teacher and students. It calls students as co-researchers in role to collaborate setting particular targets and following particular steps. Teacher and students come closer to each other through interaction as natural and dramatic characters.

2) establishes research in drama role as a problem-solving form. Examining reality is elaborated within an imaginary context, where learners cease being students and undertake a task impersonating others. They detect, investigate and solve problems under specific circumstances which they specify themselves.

3) promotes active 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.

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