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## Mantle of the Expert Role Framing in EFL Teaching to Young Learners

Georgia KOSMA<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to present a didactic intervention for teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in a Greek primary school. In line with the study a teaching scenario was designed based on action research and was implemented through the drama inquiry-based teaching method of Mantle of the Expert (MoE). The scenario was topically contextualized to provide opportunities for meaningful target language use, reflecting the principles of the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (IFLC) as well as the Common European Framework (CEFR) for languages A1-A2 communicative adequacy descriptors of the Council of Europe six-level language proficiency scale. A qualitative research approach through Content Analysis was implemented on the collected research data, from which very significant evidence was collected concerning the positive impact of MoE role framing on enhancing students' emotional engagement in the learning process. Research data provide strong indications that MoE constitutes an effective approach to EFL teaching, as derived from the stimulation of students' motivation and the development of their responsibility during the learning process, that, in turn, increase students' self-esteem and self-confidence.*

**Keywords:** role framing; action research; Mantle of the Expert; foreign language teaching.

### Introduction

The field of foreign language learning has undergone numerous changes on a global scale over the centuries. From the period when foreign language learning implied merely conquering the linguistic code we have realized that for a more 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. Towards this direction, the growing body of research findings highlights the effectiveness of the incorporation of drama methods in foreign language learning concerning enhancing students' emotional engagement in the learning

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process (Florea, 2011; Papadopoulos & Kosma, 2018) as they transform the learning context into “a low risk environment” (Cooper & Dever, 2001, p. 60) where students communicate in EFL spontaneously.

In this framework this study adopts a multi-sensory approach to EFL teaching, where students are approached by more than one sensory modality. This entails stimulation of students’ motivation and increase of their eagerness to be emotionally and thus actively engaged in the learning process.

### **Mantle of the Expert: Conceptual framework**

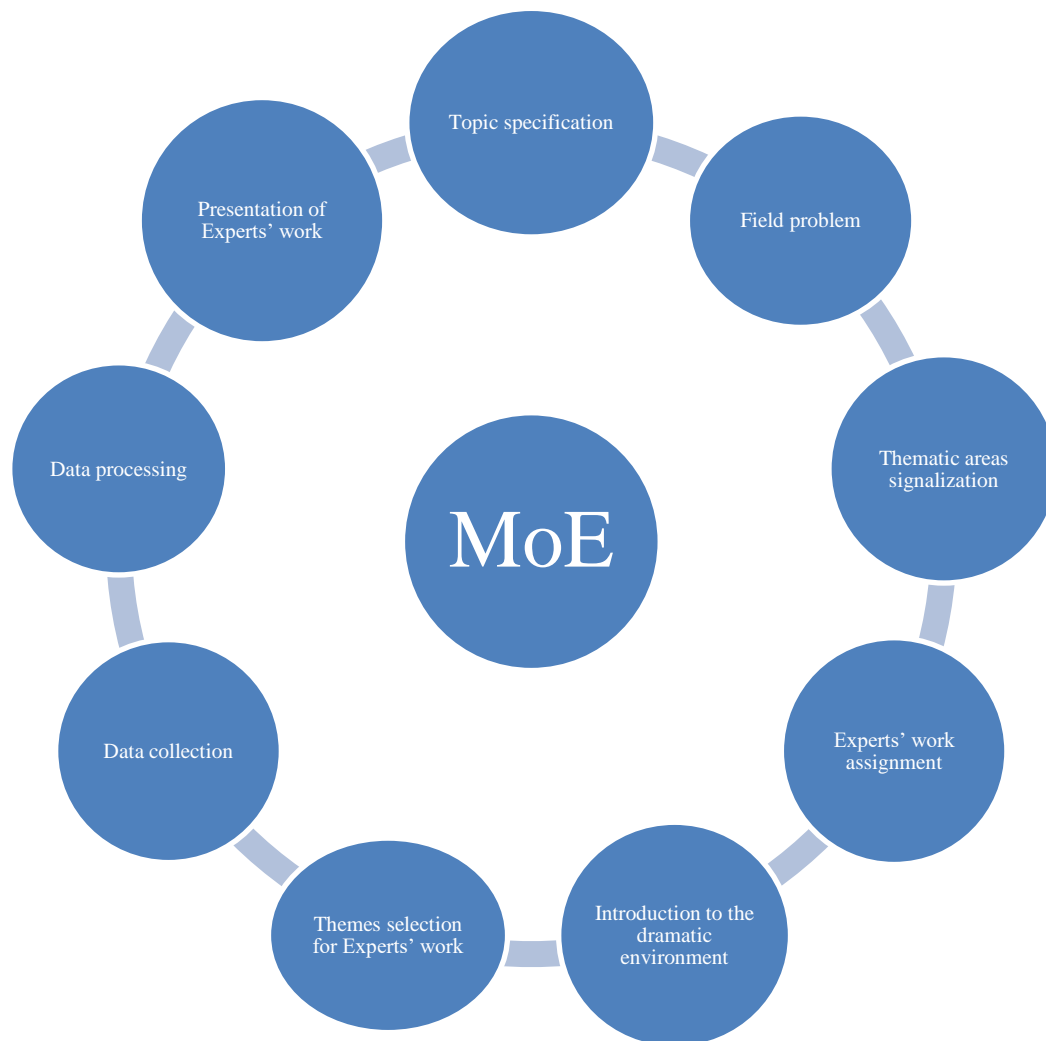
MoE is a dramatic inquiry-based teaching method that uses fictional contexts to generate engaging, purposeful learning activities. It is argued that MoE is not a cloak by which a person is recognized, rather “a quality of leadership, carrying standards of behavior, morality, responsibility, ethics and 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 allowed 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 the 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 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 assignment is carefully designed by the teacher to generate activities and tasks that involve students in studying diverse areas of the curriculum to complete an inquiry project under the teacher's guidance in authentic settings of collaborative action with the concurrent personal responsibility of their actions (Παπαδόπουλος, 2010b). 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 Παπαδόπουλος, 2010a)**

Students' framing in dramatic roles 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 Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (IFLC)**

The continuous developments of the European Union policy concerning foreign language school education as well as factors that 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 based on: 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 constitutes a social process that takes place based on inquiry and participants' collaboration, as in real life.

IFLC aspires to develop students' positive attitude towards English through promoting their creative and critical ability, elements that are prerequisites 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 behavior (Chryshochoos, Chryshochoos & 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.

Given this educational reform, the EFL Curriculum is classified into language proficiency levels, 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)**

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

## Method

The study focuses on the implementation of a nine teaching hours didactic intervention in the EFL curriculum of the 6th primary school grade by means of utilizing the MoE dramatic inquiry-based teaching approach. The research was conducted during the first term of the 2020-2021 school year in the context of students' weekly schedule. For the needs of the intervention, 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 EFL teaching was adopted based on the topic introduced by the specific unit, reflecting the CEFR principles. In this respect, visual, auditory and kinesthetic elements were combined in problem-solving activities that were designed based on modern trends in foreign

language teaching and stimulated the development of students' multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1999).

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 to reflect on the difficulties observed and recorded during the intervention 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 EFL learning in the primary school setting in a manner compatible with the IFLC curriculum as regards enhancing students' emotional engagement in the learning process.

The research was grounded on the following three research questions:

- 1) Does the integration of the dramatic inquiry-based teaching method of MoE in the EFL learning process stimulate students' motivation?
- 2) Does the integration of the dramatic inquiry-based teaching method of MoE in the EFL learning process develop students' responsibility for their learning?
- 3) Does the integration of the dramatic inquiry-based teaching method of MoE in the EFL learning process enhance students' self-confidence in the oral and written production of the target language?

### **Participants and study field**

The study was implemented in a sixth-grade class consisting of twenty-one students aged 11-13 years old, ten boys and eleven girls, of the 1st Experimental Primary School of Alexandroupolis, Greece. All students were born in Alexandroupolis and had been learning EFL for six years in that school setting. As indicated by the IFLC (Pedagogical Institute, 2011), students were expected to be at CEFR A1, A2 level. However, the class consisted of students

at different stages of language development. Students' EFL learning heterogeneity in both receptive (reading and listening) and productive (writing and speaking) skills was 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.

Greek was students' mother tongue (L1). 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).

### **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' questionnaire, which, in the researcher's view, would ensure participants' unrestrained responses. 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 into students' first language to prevent potential misunderstandings. Comments in students' L1 were translated into English at the researcher's responsibility so that they could be incorporated into the collected research data.

The aforementioned data sources were used by the researcher as a baseline to determine students' learning gains as well as their emotional engagement in the teaching - learning process.

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). 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 teaching-learning process.

Nonetheless, as there is no completely unstructured observation (Papadopoulou, 1999), the researcher constructed an observation key to facilitate the classification and transcription of the collected data (table 2).

**Table 2: Observation Key**

		Always	Sometimes	Often	Hardly ever
1	Students' motivation in activities				
2	Students' commitment to task completion as Experts				
3	Students' self-confidence in the oral production of the target language				
4	Students' self-confidence in the written production of the target language				
5	Expression of students' emotions				

### ***Journal***

Due to its reflective function, the 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 activities concerning the research objective.
2. After each teaching period students anonymously kept field notes on their engagement in activities as well as their feelings.

### ***Questionnaire***

By the completion 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' viewpoints regarding their motivation in activities. The second question urged students to describe their feelings about their commitment to task completion as Experts. The third question provided students with the opportunity to express their feelings about using English in oral and written form.

### **Procedure**

To carry out the didactic intervention a whole course book unit was redesigned by the teacher/researcher. The didactic intervention requirements were met by designing a teaching scenario, titled *If I were the Minister of Education*, based on the action research three circles. The scenario focused on the decision taken by the Minister of Education to evaluate state primary education in Greece to improve it. On this particular occasion, the Minister of Education assigned to the consultants' experts company, the commission of examining state primary education and present a final report comprising suggestions on the issue.

1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> teaching hours

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 the state primary education in Greece during which students draw up personal experience and formulate their viewpoints.

#### Stage 2 (Topic specification)

The teacher reads aloud a letter from the Minister of Education to the class plenary. According to that letter, to improve state primary education, the Minister assigns to the consultants' experts company, which teacher and students have established earlier, the task to mediate thoroughly on state primary education 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 Minister about the 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 framed with expertise as a fictional team. The commission is assigned by the external agent to students-as-experts and is reviewed. Students and teacher 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 Mantle of the Expert (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 examining school facilities, school subjects, course books, staff, 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, educators, engineers etc.

### 3<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> teaching hours

#### 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 based on their role, such as school facilities speculation, students' interviews, teacher's interviews, school course books.

#### Stage 7 (Data collection)

Experts are given background knowledge. Depending on the commission's needs, they collect data from various Internet sources under the teacher's guidance.

#### Stage 8 (Data processing)

Students are engaged in collaborative activities. They make drawings of their experiences as regards state primary education. More importantly, they develop empathy through imagining what a typical day of a primary school student in the future 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, character outline, thought detection, character outline, improvisation. Moreover, students draw pictures, make digital comics/stories and write a final report in the target language, as indicated by CEFR A1, A2 levels.

5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> teaching hours

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.

9<sup>th</sup> teaching hour

Stage 10 (Evaluation of Experts' work)

The teacher presents and reads aloud to the class plenary a letter, through which the Minister of Education expresses to the Experts' company her 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 questionnaires and artistic creations, such as depictions.

## Findings

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

1. promoting students' emotional engagement in the educational process through their role framing. Despite their initial surprise, students were soon framed as Experts. The positive effect of role framing on students is stressed in the researcher's following journal entries:  
*"At first most students were observed to be surprised and challenged, however, they soon accepted their new roles as Experts."*  
*"Their new identity as Experts increased students' involvement in the activities."*
2. developing 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 eagerness and responsibility for their learning. They particularly liked the fact that they were allowed 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 felt it gave them a greater feeling of freedom.

This is confirmed by the following evidence:

*“I was impressed because we learned without the book!”* (Student 3)

*“What I like most is that we are responsible for a commission. We have never done that before.”* (Student 6)

*“Everybody in our group is proud of our success!”* (Student 16)

3. enhancing students’ self-confidence in the oral and written production of the target language. Students enjoyed learning through a commission since they were provided with opportunities for developing language skills through imaginary, yet realistic, roles. They declared that EFL learning can be much more than a boring process. On the contrary, students felt pleased because they could finally use English in real-life situations. This, in turn, enhanced their self-esteem and fostered their self-confidence in using the target language. 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’ journals and questionnaire answers are indicative of their feelings:

*‘It’s so exciting to learn without the book!’* (Student 2)

*“I feel like a real Expert! It’s great!”* (Student 18)

*“We are real professionals because we have our own company!”* (Student 10)

*“I am excited because we have to carry out a real task!”* (Student 12)

*“I am thrilled because we cooperate with the Minister of Education! We mustn’t disappoint her.”* (Student 14)

*“I am very proud because I’m trying to help the Minister! I don’t want the project to finish.”* (Student 21)

*“Let’s be Experts in more school subjects!”* (Student 11)

From the above, it appears that the results confirmed at large our research objective and research questions. Nonetheless, it is necessary to underline the research constraints which were encountered:

1. 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 four times to ask students to remain in the classroom during break time 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 and third questionnaire questions:

*"There was a lot of noise when we moved to work in our groups."* (Student 17)

*"I didn't like it when the teacher asked us to continue working during break time."* (Student 19)

## Results

Taking under consideration the aforementioned constraints, it appears that the dramatic inquiry-based teaching method of MoE is a dynamic supplement to the mainstream EFL teaching practice compatible with the IFLC curriculum. It can replace outdated traditional school book exercises which repeat grammatical structures and mechanical vocabulary drilling exercises. MoE fosters students' emotional engagement in learning activities that inflame their imagination. Bearing in mind that play in the form of undertaking roles is the infrastructure of MoE, it becomes clear that the specific teaching approach instills in students a more positive attitude to learning. In MoE knowledge construction is situational and purposeful and thus internalized and meaningful.

In a nutshell, MoE creates learning environments that are fundamental to achieving optimal learning as it:

1. expands the cognitive and emotional basis of social learning through the creation of authentic inquiring learning environments which promote the social nature of learning
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 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.

## Discussion

The findings of this study revealed the benefits of integrating MoE in EFL learning contexts, fully complying with research findings that 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 the natural environment under professional consciousness terms. In this way, they acquire a multiple angled experience that, in turn, fosters an open interpretation of reality.

Given the aforementioned findings, the researcher believes that the didactic use of MoE in EFL learning creates authentic environments that 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 EFL teaching. The didactic use of MoE in 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 spoken and written interaction in the target language. Additionally, MoE expands the cognitive and emotional basis of social learning as it creates student-friendly virtual environments that 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. 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 EFL learning process. MoE promotes active self-regulated learning by means of enhancing self-confidence and responsibility. 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, the constraints of the study must be 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 that, in turn, would have led to more in-depth results. Additionally, as the study concerns primary school students, the researcher estimates 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 can adapt their didactic practice to their students' experiences, interests and learning profiles.

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