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**Action Research in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learning context: an educational study by means of the dramatic teaching approach *Mantle of the Expert***

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# Action Research in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learning context: an educational study by means of the dramatic teaching approach *Mantle of the Expert*

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**Dr. Simos Papadopoulos and Georgia Kosma**

## **Abstract**

There has been a long history concerning the application of educational action research in a diversity of school subjects. The present study focuses on the implementation of a two week- action research by means of the dramatic teaching approach of the *Mantle of the Expert* in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learning context of a Greek state primary school. Students' learning profile as well as school curriculum targets are thoroughly discussed, in an effort to examine the efficiency of mainstream teaching practice justifying the necessity of the specific action research.

The implementation of the action research offers useful pedagogic insight with regard to

- creating dialogic learning environment
- enflaming children's imagination
- fostering self esteem
- promoting teacher professional development

Keywords: action research, Mantle of the Expert, English as a Foreign Language, school curriculum, teacher professional development

## Mantle of the Expert- Theoretical framework

Mantle of the Expert is a dramatic-inquiry-based approach to teaching and learning invented and developed by pioneer drama educator Professor Dorothy Heathcote (1926-2012) in the 1980s. It concerns the sociological - anthropological field of reality investigation and can be utilized as either a dramatic teaching method or a theatrical technique. Either technique creates a dramatic environment asking participants to undertake expert roles across the whole spectrum of the social and historic development (Heathcote & Herbert 1985).

In general terms, Mantle of the Expert relies on three pedagogic modes of teaching: inquiry learning, drama for learning and expert framing, which involves children being placed as adult experts. Put it simply, Mantle of the Expert is about teachers allowing children to act as *experts* in an imaginary *enterprise* (Heathcote, & Bolton 1995). In this *fictional context* the challenge is to ensure that the children have something to explore rather than receive. The teacher establishes a believable world where learners impersonate expert professionals and role play mastery of field knowledge. This world typically takes the form of a *commission* from an imaginary *client*. The teacher guides the students into their theatrical roles in order to fulfill an imaginary project or task. One of the main focuses of the approach is to allow students to demonstrate personal and social responsibility in the fulfillment of the fictional contract. The teacher's main role is to keep learners engaged and maintain the proper *tensions* as they arise during the learning activity. Properly balanced, the learners are able to enter this imaginary world cognitively, emotionally and intellectually.

## Efl (English as a foreign language) teaching in the Greek state primary school context

Recent findings during an evaluation of Greek compulsory education (IoEP 2015) found out that teaching English as a foreign language was grossly outdated in a socio-culturally heterogeneous learning environment which:

1. does not offer multiple learning paths
2. does not promote learners' experiential engagement in the educational procedure and collaborative discovery of knowledge
3. does not create genuine dynamic dialogic environments, which foster further development of linguistic skills and life skills
4. does not ensure fertile conditions for the creation of community and classroom culture

These results are congruent with the finding about student learning attitudes. Learning is influenced by children's differentiated interests and motives as well as by the meaning students attribute to what is happening at school, in other words, their

expectations (PI 2011). As a consequence, the knowledge students produce is defined to a big extent by the interest which motivates them (Habermas 1970). This finding is in turn congruent with Max Van Manen's view of the educational relationship between teacher and learner (Van Manen 1991). Teachers cannot work in a bubble. They must realise that everything the student brings to school in relation to knowledge; feelings, interests, abilities, perceptions, must be associated with what the student learns at school.

## Action research in the educational field

Learning to teach is regarded as a lifelong venture (May 1993). The history shows a long standing concern for the application of educational action research in a diversity of school subjects. The perception of every good teacher as an automatic researcher (O'Toole 2006) is in line with the broadly accepted consideration that teachers can and should be researchers of their own teaching practice, a view with a long standing tradition at a theoretical level at least (Dewey 1904). It should not be implied, however, that a single action research project can solve all teaching problems. In fact, analyzing a pedagogical problem often leads to inquiring more problems (Zhang et al. 2010).

The underlying reason for the need of research in the educational field is the fact that learning conditions in the school classroom change due to socio-economic and political changes. Bearing this in mind, it becomes obvious that action research engages teachers in a reflective process because they take a critical stance towards their action (McNiff & Whitehead 2016). Reflection enables teachers to realize their personal educational theory and attempt to reform it. As a result, they acquire a kind of professional knowledge and growth which facilitates their teaching autonomy. Gradually, action research enables teachers to perceive that complex problems and their solutions can only be discovered when participants play a decisive part. In this sense, action research in the educational field is regarded as a form of practical philosophy (Carr 2004, Elliot 2009).

## Research objective/Research questions

The present study focuses on the implementation of a two week- action research by means of the dramatic teaching approach *Mantle of the Expert* in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learning context of a Greek state primary school. In fact it constituted a pre research stage, part of a doctoral research which followed later setting a number of individual goals. Some of these were the investigation of the teacher - learner role during the teaching practice with and without the use of theatrical techniques and the broader teaching - learning process which is created by utilising the dramatic teaching method *Mantle of the Expert*.

The objective of the present research was to examine the efficacy of the current teaching practice for teaching and learning English as a foreign language in primary school, regarding students' active engagement and production of target language as defined by the Foreign Languages' Teacher Manual (PI 2014). The project also aimed at optimising the teaching - learning process and enhance students' emotional engagement by means of utilising the dramatic teaching method Mantle of the Expert.

## Sample

Two classes of the fifth grade (forty - three students in total) of the 1st Experimental Primary School of Alexandroupolis participated in the research. The school was situated in an urban area and the student potential was regarded as very heterogeneous due to the particular socio-economic and cultural traits of the region. The intervention group consisted of twenty - one students (ten boys and eleven girls). The control group consisted of twenty - two students (ten boys and twelve girls).

At the beginning of the school year the headmaster and teachers' association decided to distribute students of the fifth grade in two classes. Students were evenly distributed according to their average performance in all school subjects taught in the fourth grade and their behavioural patterns. Experimental Schools in Greece are entitled by the Ministry of Education to take such decisions. In our view, both groups were quite properly matched for one further reason: our research was conducted during the third school term. This implies that in the previous two school terms students' progress in relation to the agreed syllabus was measured by the same evaluation criteria as provided by the Ministry of Education in the Teacher's book progress tests. The specific tests measured students' written production of vocabulary items and specific language structures by means of activities such as multiple choice, matching pairs, categorizing and gap filling. In general terms, analysis of tests results in the 2015-2016 school year and students' marks in the previous school year contributed to students' even distribution. Both groups were acquainted with some theatrical techniques. Theatre Education was included in the primary school curriculum and the present teacher - researcher applied theatrical techniques in her teaching practice. Some of these were still image, role play, character outline, improvisation. There were thematic classrooms in the school so English classes took place in a separate classroom. It should be noted that in the doctoral action research that followed, the present researcher formed a research group consisting of four teachers - researchers teaching in three schools at the same school grade.

## Research Method

The research was conducted during the third term of the 2015-2016 school year. The extent of the contact was nine teaching hours. As far as the control group is concerned, the present researcher, who at the same time was the teacher of both groups (Edmiston 1991,1993), applied the mainstream teaching practice as defined by the Foreign Languages' Teacher Manual (PI 2014). Regarding the intervention group, the present researcher adapted part of Unit 9 of the school course book used for teaching English in the fifth grade. As it was mentioned above, the present research project was part of a doctoral research that followed right afterwards. For that reason the present researcher reflected on the efficacy of the current teaching practice in her own practice context aiming a 'small scale intervention' (Cohen et al. 2013) and then formed a four member research group for the research that followed.

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

1. is a form of reflective inquiry (Carr & Kemmis 1986), which aims at action quality improvement within (Elliott 1991).
2. constitutes a flexible implementation context which is adaptable to the particular needs of each research (Collier 1945).
3. offers an appropriate methodological context for the implementation of innovative teaching practices because educational innovation is not imposed as a product designed by external factors and presented on teachers in its final form, is subject to a continuous and repetitive comprehension, improvement and evaluation process (Rudduck & Hopkins 1985).

In our case the choice of action research as methodology for our educational research played a catalytic role indeed, as it allowed adaptation to the specific conditions and did not move in an a detailed outline binding the researcher in predetermined activities (Hopkins: 1985). In particular we adopted the Kemmis & McTaggart model (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988).

## Procedure

Students in the control group worked on lesson 1 of Unit 9 of the school course book. They practiced Past Simple and Present Perfect Simple verb forms in order to talk and write about athletes or teams with multiple records. There was a cross curricular reference on Sports, Geography and Art. The book presented photographs of three famous people with many sports records (Yiannis Kouros: ultra-distance runner, Michael Schumacher: Formula One World champion and Reinhold Messner: climber). Students had to find other famous people with similar sports records or any

other records. Students' work was organized in the following three stages as defined in the Teacher's book:

Stage 1: using the Internet/encyclopedias, asking parents in order to find out about famous athletes / teams

Stage 2: writing three sentences about the accomplishments of famous athletes/teams

Stage 3: making oral presentations in class

The project instructions did not make it clear whether students should work in pairs, in groups or individually. The teacher encouraged students to produce collaborative work; however working individually was also accepted as an option. The reason for the teacher's initiative was that in all previous projects students had queries about how they should work. The biggest part of the project did not require students' work during class. Students made their presentations to the class plenary in one teaching hour.

Students in the intervention group worked with Mantle of the Expert by means of a teaching scenario (table 7.1). It focused on the celebration of 90 years since the birth of the Balkan and Olympic medalist Fotis Kosmas (26/11/1926-16/6/1995), who lived in Alexandroupolis. For this event the Mayor of Alexandroupolis assigned to the experts archivists company the commission of designing a temporary exhibition at the city sports stadium, which is named after the famous athlete.

**Table 7.1. Mantle of the Expert scenario**

1st - 2nd teaching hours	Students were introduced to the fictional context. The commission was assigned by the external agent to students- as-experts which framed them with responsibility. The commission was reviewed. Students and teacher agreed to operate in role. Students were told that the teacher would 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).
3rd - 4th teaching hours	A fictional company/responsible team with a common goal was set up. Students were framed with expertise as a fictional team.
5th - 8th teaching hours	Students were given background knowledge. Depending on the

	commission needs, students and teacher used the Internet to access relevant information. Students were engaged in collaborative activities. They imagined what a typical day of an athlete in the past was like or a particular event that an athlete could have experienced and made relevant presentations using various theatrical techniques, such as still image, role play, character outline, improvisation. Moreover students planned the exhibition, drew pictures and wrote a final report in the target language.
9th teaching hour	Students presented the exhibition to the client representative and were rewarded for carrying out the commission successfully.

## Data collection means

Students in the intervention group were asked to keep journals on their experience and feelings. On completion of the project students were asked to fill out an anonymous questionnaire in their mother tongue with open ended questions which focused on students' opinion on working with the school book and their impression of working with Mantle of the Expert. Throughout the research the researcher observed, took photographs, and video recorded students' interplay. Moreover she kept a journal on students' target language usage, active engagement and collaboration. The above mentioned data sources were used by the present researcher as a baseline to determine students' learning gains as well as their emotional engagement in the teaching - learning process.

Our prime concern with the present research project was to attempt an intervention and achieve a qualitative approach to the mainstream teaching practice. As such we used the technique of triangulation (Somekh 1983) in order to ensure the required validity through the intersection of a variety of data (Elliott 1991, Elliott & Adelman 1996). There was no interest in ensuring that the intervention group was more successful than the control group in reaching the research objective. On the contrary we wished to highlight all research constraints so that other researchers could take them under consideration in their future applications.



## Results

Students in the control group were not observed to be happy with the project assignment. They had reactions of boredom and refusal as in all previous project assignments. They complained that they did not like it, it was difficult and that they did not have time due to their afternoon activities. In the next class meeting students reported that they were rather confused regarding the type of records they had to find. They had to work in an unclear situation. The latter is confirmed by the following evidence:

- a) six students did the project as required.
- b) three students brought photographs of people with strange Guinness records and wrote a couple of sentences as required with minor spelling mistakes.
- c) three students fulfilled the task, but preferred to make their presentation in Greek as they either hesitated or had difficulty in using target language.
- d) four students did not work on the project because they did not have access to information sources at home.
- e) three students confessed that they did not have enough time to do the project due to their afternoon activities.
- f) two students admitted that they forgot to do the project
- g) one student said that she did not do the project because she did not like it.

From the above it appears that the current teaching practice proved to be ineffective regarding students' active engagement and production of target language as defined in the agreed syllabus. Students were not emotionally engaged in the teaching - learning process.

With regard to the intervention group we need to underline a few difficulties which we encountered:

- 1) noise was unavoidable while making the necessary seating arrangements so that group work could be facilitated.
- 2) time was insufficient. The teacher had to ask students to remain in the classroom and carry on with their work during break time twice. That was not agreeably accepted by all students.
- 3) when something went wrong during group work students were quite edgy.
- 4) incidents of students laughing at others occurred during practicing still images.

Students in the intervention group were not used to having journals for any school subject, so they were quite hesitant and kept very brief notes at first. However, while the project was progressing, their entries became more detailed. Some students would even decorate them with small drawings such as hearts, smiling or frowning faces, thunders, clouds and flowers. Students expressed positive or

negative feelings in the same way in the final questionnaire as well. The following quotes are indicative of students' feelings:

*'I feel like a real expert!'*  
*'I was very worried, but I love my team now.'*  
*'I did not like my team at first, but now I'm having a great time!'*  
*'I'm angry at Mike and Dimos! They laughed at me.'*  
*'I don't like it! Some children make fun of other teams!'*  
*'It would be better for me if I could speak in Greek. I'm bored.'*  
*'There is so much noise!'*

Qualitative data processing (Bassegy 1986, Altrichter et al. 2013) offered useful pedagogic insight with regard to the following indicators:

- fostering team dialogue and communication. Students wrote the following in their journals and the questionnaire:

*'I love talking with my team because we have wonderful ideas!'*  
*'Yesterday Anna gave me very useful information. She was right.'*

- creating a cooperative atmosphere. Students emphasized the following:

*'I like it because we are working with our teacher and we are helping her!'*  
*'Our teacher is much better as our colleague!'*  
*'I know I'm weak. I love helping my team with my drawings! They like them!'*  
*'I don't understand a lot of new words but my team helps me.'*

- promoting active learning.

This is evident in the following drafts of students' written work:

### **Invitation to a Sports Celebration**

The Mayor of Alexandroupolis invites people from 9 to 99 years old to the city stadium on Friday June 16th, 2016 at 20.00 p.m. We have organized an exhibition in honour of the Balkan and Olympic medalist Fotis Kosmas. Bring your friends and family!

Admission free

The Organizing Committee

Final report of the experts' work

Three weeks ago the Mayor of Alexandroupolis asked our experts company to organize an exhibition. Our teacher was the leader. We made five teams. Each team had a different task.

It is also stressed in the following students' quotes:

*'It's so exciting to learn without the book!'*

*'It was difficult but I learned so many things.'*  
*'I am excited because I can talk about real things!'*  
*'Working for the Mayor is great!'*  
*'Why is it over?'*  
*'I wish we could work as experts in all school subjects.'*

Detailed analysis of the researcher's observation, journal, photographs and video recordings confirmed that students used target language both orally and in writing in order to communicate their thoughts and exchange ideas. Students accessed information on the Internet to write texts and make presentations using theatrical techniques. Although they made a few mistakes with regard to verb forms and vocabulary, they were observed to interact using target language in a more spontaneous, relaxed manner. Having the opportunity to suggest their own ideas enhanced students' self confidence and fostered their self esteem. They responded eagerly to group work. Despite their initial surprise students were easily framed as experts and showed creativity as well as responsibility in carrying out the assigned commission. It should not be implied, however, that effective expert framing was automatic. To a large extent it was the outcome of the teacher's effort to inspire students in a new teacher - learner collaboration.

Weak students' active engagement was of major importance. Current mainstream teaching practice did not facilitate students of weak learning styles to participate in the teaching - learning process. On the contrary, it fostered strong students' participation. Mantle of the Expert enabled weak students to reveal new talents and dexterities and thus be actively engaged in the teaching - learning process. This means that more students contributed to successful completion of the assigned task. Surprisingly, even though students were already well acquainted, working with Mantle of the Expert brought them closer to each other. They were eager to offer assistance when needed and felt happy and content during successful task progression.

In their journals and replies to the questionnaire students said that working without the school course book was a little strange but interesting. They felt it gave them a greater feeling of freedom. Additionally, they stressed the fact that classes were no longer boring. On the contrary, students felt pleased because they could finally speak English in real life situations. They admitted that they had a great time because they did not feel like students any more, yet they acquired new knowledge in terms of vocabulary. They were not afraid of making mistakes in language usage because their teacher was now their colleague who would still help them, yet in a more partner like manner. Their new identity as experts made them feel more important and consequently more eager to collaborate both with their classmates and their teacher in carrying out the assigned commission successfully. They particularly liked the fact that they were given the opportunity to negotiate with each other and plan their work. The project completion gave them an increased sense of pride and sheer satisfaction. Students confessed feeling sorry that by

project completion they had to return to working with the school course book. They even expressed their desire to work as experts in more school subjects.

In a nutshell, the results confirmed at large our hypothesis. Qualitative data processing revealed that students came closer with one another as natural and dramatic characters. They were given the opportunity to interact and discuss with each other as co researchers in role and collaborated setting particular targets and following particular steps. Working with Mantle of the Expert fostered the idea *learn now-use now* as opposed to current mainstream teaching practices which are grounded on the idea *learn now-use later*.

## Conclusion

Bearing in mind Dewey's argument that human nature seeks motivation in direct pleasure, in what is interesting (Dewey 1959), it appears that Mantle of the Expert had a multi dimensional impact on learners. In particular, Mantle of the Expert:

- creates dialogic learning environments which are fundamental to achieving optimal learning. In such environments education is less like a waiting room and more like a laboratory (Taylor 2006).
- enflames children's imagination
- expands the cognitive and emotional basis of social learning as it creates environments which promote the social nature of learning
- promotes teacher professional development

The results of the qualitative data processing of this research reinforce those educational methods that encourage students' cross curricular and interdisciplinary familiarizing with various subjects of the school curriculum. Taking under consideration the constraints of our research that were underlined above, we strongly believe that Mantle of the Expert can successfully supplement mainstream Efl teaching practice. It can replace outdated traditional school book exercises which repeat grammatical structures and often confuse students due to their unclear instructions. It can also replace mechanical vocabulary drilling exercises. Mantle of the Expert fosters students' emotional engagement in learning activities which enflame their imagination. As the poet Louis Aragon claims: 'Your imagination, my dear reader, is worth more than you imagine.' (Kershaw & Nicholson 2011). This in turn contributes to the development of students' linguistic skills and life skills. Students are no longer passive recipients of new information. They become active participants in the creative process of exploring in role 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.

Our research made it clear that the Mantle of the Expert approach engages the EFL teacher in a very creative process. The teacher reflects on the efficiency of the current teaching practice in his own practice context and designs learning activities which keep students experientially engaged and motivated. Through this involvement in curriculum research and curriculum development the teacher reforms his personal educational theory, reestablishes his relationship with students and acquires professional growth.

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.

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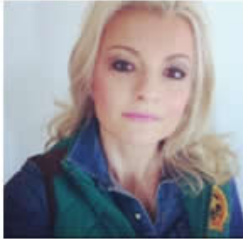


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