

## Education in the 'Post-Truth' era: The importance of Critical Literacy in the Greek EFL classroom<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*Today's world is one of quick thinking, fast talking and prompt, on-the-spot decisions, and as such, society needs not only educated members but also active ones, able to question and scrutinize anything they see, hear or even think of.*

*In this light and based on strategies regarding the teaching of critical literacy, this paper explored multiple perspectives through a storybook and multiple learning tasks aiming at developing students' critical literacy in language reading instruction in the EFL classroom. These tasks were carried out by 7 sixth graders (aged 11- 12 years old) of a primary school in Greece. The main purpose was to provide insights into developing students' critical literacy skills -with the power they hold as language learners- while developing all four language skills at the same time.*

*This 'mini' project was carried out in a total of 10 two-hour sessions. It focused on students' personal practices on specific thematic areas, which in conjunction with students' interviews, drawings and personal thoughts constituted the main tools.*

*The present study found that although students developed a critical stance toward and re-examined their familiar world, much more attention and implementation is needed in Greece if we hope our students to be critically literate in addition to mastering the four traditional language skills.*

### Key Words

Critical Literacy, Second/Third Language Reading Instruction, English as a Second/Foreign Language.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 *Critical Literacy - Definition*

We live in the so-called 'Post-Truth' world, where fake news and prevailing, subjective trends compete equally with peer-reviewed research. In response to the challenges of this world, teachers are faced with teaching students how to think objectively, comprehend in a deeper way and be active consumers of knowledge. Modern language education should aim at developing critical thinkers who show a generalized critical stance and move beyond the basic comprehension of the texts.

In this light, modern language education should evolve under the auspices of 'critical literacy' (a framework used in classroom contexts worldwide, yet not that extensively in the Greek educational setting) to question issues of social justice and bring in new ideas (Beach & Cleovoulou, 2014).

The term 'critical literacy' has been given various definitions by many scholars over the years. Critical literacy involves accepting multiple perspectives and possibilities (Green, 2001), by asking students to deconstruct meanings not only in literature (written texts), but also in oral texts or the media. Students who have mastered critical literacy are able to read reflectively and interpret various messages through a critical lens. Mastering critical literacy and being active users of information presupposes a set of skills and strategies on the part of students that will enable them to identify and analyze the authors' messages in depth (Mc Lauglin & De Voodg, 2004 in Papadopoulos & Griva, 2017).

The concept of critical literacy is much wider than mere literacy and should be distinguished from critical thinking. In critical literacy there is a 'problem posing' situation, based on the learners' everyday preoccupations (Freire 1972a) and it deals with social injustice, holding that "individual criticality is intimately linked with social criticality" (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p. 55), whereas critical thinking is more of an individualized act. According to Freire (1993, p. 68) "there is no true word that is not at the same time praxis; thus to speak a true word is to transform the world." His concept was pretty simple: reading cannot take place independently of the world the reader lives in, since it is in this world that critically competent people create values and principles (Freire, 1972b). "A critical reading of reality" (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p.36) means to explore and analyze the world, understand how sociopolitical or economic systems influence or manipulate history, culture or even language by conferring a special status to some people in society and taking it away from others at the same time. Therefore, words can serve as powerful guides for students to interpret and challenge existing structures of inequality. Critical literacy involves "second guessing, reading against the grain, asking hard and harder questions, seeing underneath, behind and beyond texts, trying to see and 'call' how these texts establish and use power over us, over others, on whose behalf, in whose interests" (Luke, 2004, p.4 in Yoon, 2016).

Furthermore, according to the review of the literature, Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys (2002, in Mc Laughlin & De Voogd in Literacy Gains, 2009) identify some principles related to critical literacy which pertain to the challenge of the commonplace, the interrogation of multiple perspectives, and the use of literacy practices to promote social justice as well as the focus on sociopolitical issues. Janks (1991, p.192) is another scholar in the field of critical literacy who claims that students should be able to deconstruct 'discourse' in an effort to help them "resist attempts to subject them through language". Janks (2000) puts forward four interdependent orientations to literacy education: domination as a way to reproduce power-related relationships, access to texts that value diversity and avoid discrimination, diversity that will lead to social change and design orientation which aims to develop students' ability to unfold their creativity and new ideas (Janks, 2000). Finally, Jones (2006) (with whom I identify with to a great extent) makes use of the concept of 'layers' and 'tenets' to describe critical literacy. The first layer- perspective- refers to the creator of the text and the perspectives that help people construct a text. The second layer – positioning- focuses on the fact that all texts place people either in the margin or at the centre of the text. The third layer- power- refers to the power of the language practices that can be used to resist or oppress (Jones, 2006). 'Tenets' include deconstruction which refers to the analysis of a text regarding how people are positioned in it, and reconstruction, which refers to the reconstruction of marginalized people, and social action, which targets social change. If considered together, all these definitions help in the conceptualization of critical literacy both as a theoretical notion but also as a powerful tool to approach critical literacy teaching and learning.

From the abovementioned viewpoints, it can be concluded that critical literacy goes beyond the mere understanding of texts as well as beyond didactic or factual learning. It is a process that works with the written forms to bring to light the injustice that takes place in today's world. This process to literacy aims to enable students to "recognize various tensions and enable them to deal effectively with them" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 49) by giving them the opportunity to dare to transform the reality of their own world. Therefore, being critically literate is of utmost importance for students in the media saturated and diverse world they live in (Comber, 2001 in 'Literacy gains', 2009).

### **1.2 The Why and How of the teaching of critical literacy in the EFL classroom**

The practice of critical literacy in contexts where English is taught to speakers of other languages as a second or foreign language, emerged in the beginning of the 21st century, "when the term "critical literacy" and affiliate concepts such as "critical language awareness", "critical reading", and "critical writing" began to be used in academic circles" (Koon, 2001; Lin, 2000 in Fajardo, 2015). In Greece, the main focus on foreign language teaching has traditionally been the mastery of the four basic skills and the development of students' communicative skills.

Based on ELINET, only one percent of students in the Greek educational context are taught by teachers who use a variety of children's books, compared to an EU average of 13%. No students whatsoever are taught by teachers who use magazines or newspapers compared to an EU average of 4%, while two percent of students are taught by teachers who rely on materials from different areas as a basis for reading instruction and enhancement of literacy compared to an EU average of 9%. Not surprisingly enough, ninety-five percent of fourth graders in Greece are taught by teachers who use textbooks as the basis of reading instruction, compared to an EU average of 78% (Mullis et al. 2003 in ELINET project, 2016).

Although some initiatives with a focus on literacy competencies have been taken (on a pilot level) only in lower and upper secondary schools throughout Greece unsuccessfully, the above data goes to show that class activities and resources seem to generally view language learning as a cognitive activity (Abednia & Izadinia, 2013; Kumagai & Iwasaki, 2011 in Fajardo, 2015). EFL (English as a Foreign Language) pedagogy has mostly focused on correct English structures and forms rather than on language use (Lotherington & Jenson, 2011 in Fajardo, 2015). In line with this, Lotherington & Jenson (2011, in Fajardo, 2015), maintain that English language teachers tend to focus more on students' English grammatical competence as well as the analysis of English forms and structures of decontextualized sentences at the expense of critical multimodal interpretations. Generally speaking, language learning shouldn't be viewed as a mere cognitive activity and current EFL practices shouldn't be limited to the mastery of the four language skills, using conventional literacy practices. Instead, the primary purpose of foreign language teaching should be the discussion of social issues and the development of a variety of critical awareness skills and reasoning abilities, such as juxtaposing, examining the author's intentions, questioning and exploring multiple perspectives, on the whole (Zorbas & Kokoroskos, 2020-in press; Papadopoulos & Griva, 2017).

As Jennifer O'Brien (Luke, O'Brien and Comber, 2001) and Vivian Vasquez (1996) indicate, critical literacy should not only be limited to academically proficient or even older students but can be taught to primary students as well, using all kinds of texts. In any case, when teaching critical literacy, there is a great variety of strategies to choose from. Among them, the *Guided Comprehension 5-step direct instruction process* (Mc Lauglin & Allen, 2002a) which is about explaining, demonstrating, guiding, practicing and reflecting and *problem posing questions* which assist in exploring the text and engaging in critical literacy (Mc Lauglin & De Voogd, 2004), are the most widely used. Other helpful techniques include *bookmarking* on which specific information based on the text is recorded or *story mapping* in which parts of the story are represented in visual form (Mc Lauglin & De Voogd, 2004). Other strategies that are suggested are *patterned partner reading* (Mc Lauglin & Allen, 2002a) which is about reading interactively with a partner, *connection stems* which allow for activating prior knowledge and the

*switching* technique which helps show biases in the text (Mc Lauglin & De Voogd, 2004). What is more, there is the *alternative texts* technique, representing different perspectives from the ones the reader is actually reading, the *juxtaposing* of two contrasting texts, *mind and alternative mind portraits* of two points of view and *focus groups* that critically analyze different points of view (Mc Lauglin & De Voogd, 2004), to name some. Finally, another way of looking at critical literacy is through the Four Resources model, developed by Luke and Freebody in 1990. This framework which aimed to provide a balanced practice to engage learners in a range of literacy roles, included the four roles of readers as (1) *code breakers* referring to encoding and decoding written and visual language, (2) *text participants* regarding meaning making from multi-modal texts, (3) *text users* aiming to identify written and visual texts for social purpose and (4) *text analysts* referring to the analysis of underlying values and views.

## **2. Rationale and Objectives of the project**

Given that there has been a wide range of critical literacy programs in the students' mother tongue and not in a foreign language (Ko & Wang, 2009; Ko, 2013; Norton & Toohey, 2004 in Papadopoulos & Griva, 2017), the present project was launched in the hopes of familiarizing students with the notion of critical literacy and developing their critical awareness skills. In essence, the project constitutes the very first attempt of engaging students in critical and inquiry – based processes through which students would become critical readers and develop all their skills. Critical literacy teaching takes place within an inquiry-based setting, since inquiry pedagogy is based on a constructivist learning theory, emphasizing “the importance of building on students' prior knowledge, scaffolding new experiences and the students' construction of knowledge” (DeWitt, 2003 in Beach, E. & Cleovoulou, Y. 2014) Therefore, inquiry pedagogy frames the research as well, because it is a student-driven experiential approach to learning (Bredo, 2003; Tudge & Scrimsher, 2003 in Beach, E. & Cleovoulou, Y. 2014) and incorporates co-operation and collaboration among learners who are in pursuit of a common goals or interests (Bell, Urhahne, Schanze, & Ploetzner, 2010 in Beach, E. & Cleovoulou, Y. 2014).

The project is based on a story book called *Bongo the Dinosaur*, written by Evi Marami who is an educator herself and an upcoming writer. It is a story about a special dinosaur with a unique name and a ‘different’ appearance, for which he is discriminated against and secluded. In the end of the book, because of a heroic act, ‘Bongo’ is accepted and recognized as an equal member of the village where he lives with other dinosaurs. The story celebrates diversity and touches upon various social issues such as friendship, bullying, discrimination, human relationships, and exploitation, to name some. It is quite a simple-yet powerful story for young learners with well-developed ideas that are unfolded in a smooth way and a colorful illustration that grabs their attention.

In general, children's stories have always provided a rich input for language development making them ideal tools in the classroom. Apart from the joy a story offers, there are many pedagogical implications if they are used correctly in the classroom (namely linguistic, sociocultural, personal, emotional as well as cognitive). Stories can expose learners to a variety of styles and can help them develop their overall skills. Bretz (1990, in Pathan, 2013) believes that stories promote critical thinking and aesthetic appreciation, whereas Lazar (1993 in Pathan, 2013) claims that stories provide students with material that is motivating and has great educational value. This material helps students develop their interpretative abilities and their language awareness. Moreover, stories have always transmitted values and principles. As Kirschenbaum (1995, p. 68) points, "storytelling is one of the effective tools for inculcating morality, especially for the youth, as stories contain powerful images and symbols and operate on both conscious and unconscious levels, conveying intellectual and emotional meaning." Especially in today's world, where values are deteriorating, stories can be the best method not only to readdress issues of morality but also to confer effective emotional and social benefits. What is more, stories are conducive to mastering the target language in an EFL context and developing various individual, learning strategies as well as types of intelligences.

### **3. Sample – Research Tools**

The target population of the project are young language learners who attend the 6<sup>th</sup> grade of a primary school in a village in the Western Greece. It is a mixed ability class of 7 children aged 11-12 who differ in learning styles, strategies, skills and even nationality. Thus, not all children are monolingual. What is of great interest though, is that these children have never been taught English in their school before. Their school is a three-teacher multigrade one, meaning that 3 teachers are responsible for all six classes and specialized teaching staff (in music, foreign languages and ICT) has been appointed this year for the first time. This is not a deterrent though, as the majority of the children have been attending English in language schools for at least 3 years, so they are quite familiar with the foreign language.

According to the Common European Framework of Reference levels, the class belongs to A2 pre- intermediate level of language teaching. Specifically, these young learners can understand sentences and expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance and can produce oral and written texts on familiar topics. They are also capable of finding specific information or predict and describe aspects of their background. Most of the students have a really positive attitude towards English but of course there are those who are naughty, lack concentration or show no interest at all. In that case, apart from mere teaching, I employ challenging activities or communicative tasks that make them adopt roles.

The research presented here is a mini story-based project carried out over a period of three months. The English teacher, who established a safe and inclusive environment early on, acted as the facilitator of the study and the main guide of the seven participants who took part. Field notes were written over the course of the project and along with the students' writings, drawings, activities, personal thoughts and interviews constituted the main research tools.

#### 4. Findings / Discussion

Various suggestions have been made about the kinds of classroom strategies that can best instill critical literacy. Given that a single strategy or a one-type-fits-all group of strategies is considered incomplete, the combination of some strategies with other aspects of teaching may contribute to students' success. Personally, I chose to proceed smoothly. All the activities employed were carried out in an inquiry-based setting, addressing students who are new to this teaching approach. The basic framework on which the project was based, was the "Four Resources Model", in conjunction with various strategies that underpin the study.

The selection of the specific story offered a variety of entry points for discussion. At the preliminary stage- as a warm up, I did a "picture walk" beginning with the cover. I held the book up and asked students to share their thoughts about what the book was about, encouraging them to make up a story on their own, before actually reading the real one. I started by asking them to reflect on their own expectations, think about context and activate background knowledge through the images.

The children talked about different types of dinosaurs, their immense size and capabilities. For example: *"it's about dinosaurs in the past!"*, *"dinosaurs and extinct animals"*, *"T-Rex!"* exclaimed students. Stories about facts and features of dinosaurs followed without being commented on or disregarded. To engage them further, I had them play online educational games regarding dinosaurs that provided them with information in an enjoyable way (<http://interactivesites.weebly.com/dinosaurs.html>). A discussion was also initiated by having them talk about their favorite dinosaur and provide information about it. On top of everything, they suggested that we visit the new dinosaur museum which had opened recently in Patras; *"what a coincidence!"* I thought to myself. *"Dinosaurs is indeed a matter of interest to the students!"* During the next observation, as I moved to the next pages and after I was provided drawings of their favorite dinosaur, the students realized that the book was not about dinosaurs in general. To their surprise, it was about a specific dinosaur living in the magical world of Roarland – the dinosaurs' village. During the following sessions and as the story unfolded, students got deeper and deeper into it and realized that the hero of the book was unwanted and ridiculed. In fact, instances were recorded when students expressed themselves and reacted at points when I slowed down or even paused (*oh my!/look at him!/ how nasty!/ the poor dinosaur!*

*he's all alone! / why are they laughing at him? / where are his parents, Miss? / doesn't he have any friends?).* They were also given the opportunity to ask each other about words, make connections and promote their language production skills. Following the first part of the framework articulated by Freebody and Luke (1990) in the Four Resources Model (*code breaker*), I had them spot the numerous adjectives in the story which were of high interest to them. In groups of four and three respectively, the students brainstormed ideas and the group representative jotted down the words that appealed mostly to them. I chose this activity to engage my students in speaking, since it is 'the medium through which much language is learnt and which for many is particularly conducive for learning' Bygate (1987). Then, I explained their meaning and asked them to use these words in an appropriate context (see appendix A, 1a).

After exchanging views and ideas, we put up a list of interesting words that was later used for a spelling bee. Moreover, children were involved in creating flashcards describing emotions to retrieve for a vocabulary snap (see appendix A, 1b).

Children cooperated perfectly well and had the time of their lives, both preparing the flashcards and taking part in the spelling bee. As the story unfolded, students felt strongly about the hero and through discussion, they began making connections to how they viewed themselves in relation to the characters in the book and to each other. Rather than approaching the text passively, they intended to form interpretations in light of their own knowledge and point of view. The second role of the FSM (being a reader as a meaning maker or text participant) was carried out in conjunction with the strategy of "connection stems." Here, students acted as meaning makers and had to use their background knowledge to compare personal experiences with the text, interpret words and look at the way texts are constructed to make a specific meaning (Ludwig, 2003). This strategy stirred monologues beginning with: *"This reminds me of when Kostas and all the other boys used to call me fat donuts and I told my friends to stop insulting me but they wouldn't and all this had been building up inside me and I still believe I am fat ..."* or *"I remember when Mrs. Maria used to tell me off. All the children would make fun of me and call me useless... Yes, Miss! It's true!"*

Moving on to the next role (the reader as a text user), the students had a clear understanding and grasp of the genre of the text they would be dealing with from the very beginning, mainly because of the illustration. Therefore, they would expect to approach a text appropriately, (i.e. read a children's story for their enjoyment). In this case, students were neither given more books of the same genre, nor were they introduced to various genres. Instead, they were so excited to tease out the moral issues that emerged and led them to further inquiries, that they provided me with more examples of the same genre. Some of them included the Little Prince, Alice in Wonderland etc.

The final stage (being a text analyst or a text critic) constituted the climax of the whole project and this was the moment when children really explored themselves

more deeply. The content of their own drawings was reflective of critical literacy and depicted their inner thoughts that had largely evolved, as the students explored notions of discrimination, forgiveness, compassion and friendship and experienced the social inequality of loving or disliking someone because of their external appearance. This visual innovative participation on their part, unleashed deeper understanding of the situations. They took an active part in shaping their own realities and constructed a strong personal analysis of the events in the story by employing another strategy: the juxtaposition of these events to the world they live in (see appendix A).

What was apparent in this stage, was that providing students with texts relevant to their lives (Ladson-Billings, 2004), was highly appreciated. Indeed, students elaborated their thoughts and reflected on grave social issues such as bullying and inequality or unfair treatment. During that stage, they were encouraged to move their thoughts to the next level and through collaboration, they created a poster based on bullying and respect among children (see appendix A)

What is more, in order to express their opposition to these social issues they also switched to the strategy of *switching* to make biases in the story clearer (see appendix A). At this point, they were encouraged to question the author's intent by reexamining all the assumptions and imagining alternative versions of the story.

What is more, interviews were carried out with each student individually. The interview questions were based on the *problem-posing questions* strategy to assist in the exploration of the text. The questions preceded the Four Resources Model, since it is one of the simplest techniques to generate background information, examine whether something is missing or underrepresented and encourage open discussions. All the questions were asked either during the read aloud or at varying points. As I moved into the first pages of the book, the first questions arose: "What is the story about?", "Who is in the situation?", "Who is missing?" "Who would be most likely to read this text?" Why are we reading this text?", "How are children/adults constructed in the text?" to name some. In the very beginning, the children were pretty quick to understand that it is a children's story book that they would buy because of the vivid colors. When they think about what is missing, they mention *Bongo's family members*. Bongo has no companions or interests other than wandering in the forests. The children were taken aback by the loneliness and they remarked: "Miss, he doesn't lead a normal life, like we do!" "And how can we be compared to dinosaurs?" I replied. "But, Miss, it's a *microcosm of our own world*; instead of people the writer uses a community of dinosaurs! Look! "They are wearing shoes just like us!" The next concepts were pretty difficult to understand because the students had never been asked about the author's intention or voice: "Whose voices are represented?" I asked; "Miss!" they replied, "everyone says something and takes part in the story!" Obviously, I had to rephrase or explain further: "Whose perspective does the author favor?", "Who do you love in this book?" "Bongooo, the students called out". Therefore,

the reader is positioned to feel sadness for the main hero and the voice represented apparently is that of people who are disadvantaged or marginalized. When students realize how they have been positioned by the author, they start to identify with the hero and tell stories. Then on, questions about existing gaps were asked. Students replied that *they had no idea how these feelings of rejection initially started and at what age. "What was Bongo's childhood like?", "How is their everyday life at the village?", "How long have they lived together?" "What's the source of hatred and contempt?"* Also, the students commented on the lack of ways to confront people like the dinosaurs in the story. They pointed out that *without providing any explanation for their behavior or any kind of negotiation, the hero just forgives everybody and becomes friends with them.* There is nothing wrong with the promotion of justice, but students pointed to the need to sort out problems or misunderstandings and not take humiliation as a natural part of everyday life. In particular, they mentioned: *"At first, we are overwhelmed by feelings of sadness and misery, but as the story evolves we are angry that only in case of an emergency, Bongo is given attention. There is a change of heart, because Bongo unwisely accepts situations.* Another student commented: *"Another bad dinosaur may come to the village and he may suffer as well. Exploitation never ends, Miss."*

I must admit I was pretty amazed at their evolution of thinking as well as change of feelings. At that time, I was given the sense that they have really gone into the story and made their first steps towards developing their critical skills.

When asked about what view of the world the text is presenting, students mentioned issues like *racism, exploitation, indifference, discrimination and inequality.* *"We are also being treated unfairly, "Miss because my dad is unemployed and we cannot make ends meet."* *"So, what kind of person might the writer be?"*, I asked.

*"The writer must be a person full of feelings."*

*"She must be genuinely pure."*

*"She loves all the people in the world."*

*"She might have been bullied when she was our age."*

*"She must be a philanthropist who forgives and gives second chances to people."*

On the whole, the study constituted a preliminary attempt to explore critical literacy. Although worried in the first place about the 'unknown', students not only made personal connections to the story but they were also engaged in a way that allowed for considerable and gradual growth of their awareness. Of course, the teacher provided linguistic and non-linguistic support (scaffolding) without rendering the class teacher-centered. Even so, there is still something hopeful that emerges from the study. The fact is that children are deeply concerned about

social issues and that individual teachers begin to step out of their set instructional boxes.

## **5. Learning Outcomes – Recommendations**

On the whole, learners struggled to construct meaning from their own experiences on the one hand and perceive learning as an active enterprise, but there was also mutual respect and understanding among the learners that was being promoted. Students also displayed interpersonal intelligence and developed their critical, communication, interactive as well as sociolinguistic skills.

However, school readiness is not only related to oracy and literacy skills, but to eagerness to learn, have self-control, be cooperative and lead open discussions. All these constituted the positive outcomes of the project, since students felt really comfortable to share experiences and open themselves to their peers. However, they seemed to feel prepared to tackle only much-scaffolded cases (either through gestures, appropriately stressed words, or intonation and extended pauses). Indeed, social constructivist theories put much emphasis on learning from and with others. Vygotsky postulates that scaffolding works as long as the children engage in activities that are within their zone of proximal development, (ZPD). In this case, children were able to succeed to the best possible extent with adult guidance or cooperating with other peers, something which would be unattainable if it weren't for them. In line with this, the interactions children have with others in school settings are necessary for them to learn about the world, about their own feelings, as well as the wants and feelings of others around them. Children should be able to speculate and reflect on ways in which a text illuminates the world they live in. By gaining this skill, through scaffolded learning, they will be able to tie values of interactions and classroom practices to the printed text and in turn, read, write and comment on their own world.

## **6. Conclusion**

Teaching critical literacy is an active, ongoing process that requires careful planning and constant reflection by the classroom teacher. Since in the Greek educational context the teaching of critical literacy lags behind, it is up to the teachers to foster critical conversations among students related to social issues and help them develop their thought processes. Therefore, for educators who wish to transform communities and realities, critical literacy is worth teaching, if critically literate beings are going to keep trying for a just and humane world.

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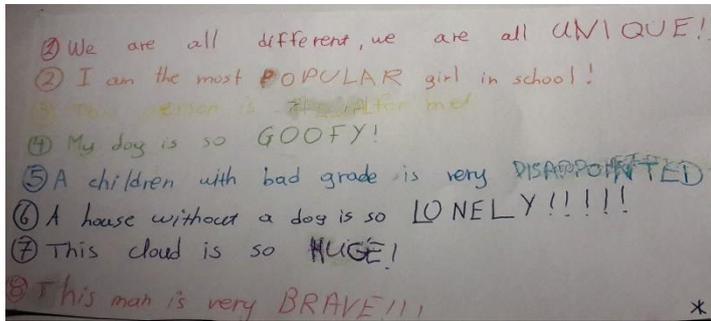
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## Appendix A

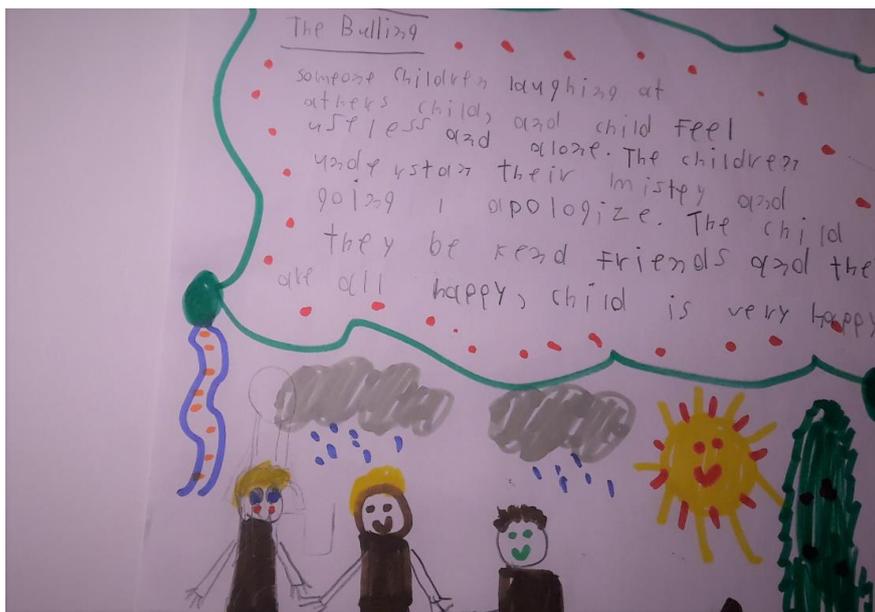
### Putting the words in the appropriate context



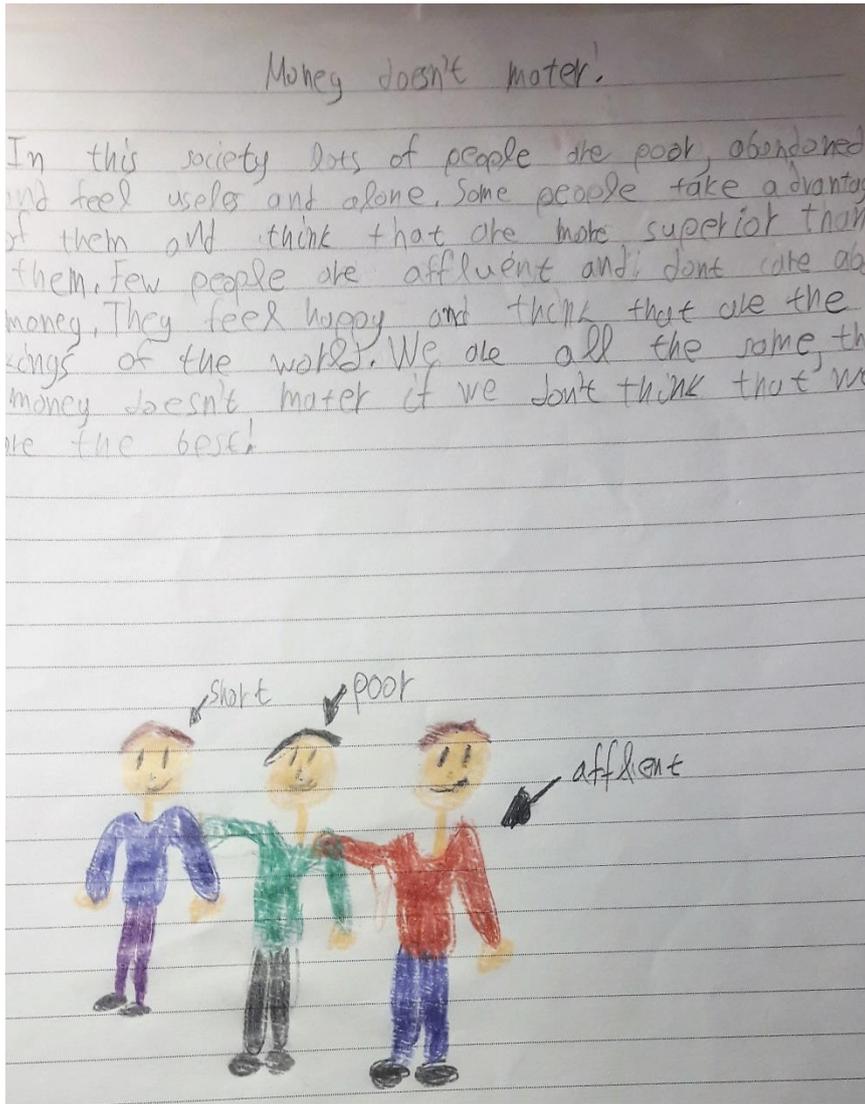
### Flashcards depicting emotions



### The juxtaposition of the events in the story to the world they live in







Creation of a poster based on bullying and respect among children



## The use of the “switching” technique

