Using poetry to foster Critical Thinking and Metacognition in a Primary School EFL context

Aspasia DELILIGKA & Christine CALFOGLOU

Critical thinking and metacognition are two concepts that have played an increasingly important role in education and have been the focus of a substantial body of research related to the skill of Reading (Mohseni, Seifoori & Ahangari, 2020; Navarro, 2021). Poetry, on the other hand, though much discussed and analyzed as a genre, has not been adequately explored as a tool used to foster the development of critical thinking skills and metacognitive reading strategies among Young Learners. The present article attempts to show that the teaching of poetry can have a positive effect not only on Young Learners' critical thinking and use of metacognitive reading strategies, but on their reading comprehension as well. This is demonstrated through the presentation of a poetry project implemented with 16 students, another 16 being assigned to a control group, in a primary education EFL context, over a three-month period and through analyzing learners' performance and attitudes prior to and after implementation. The results reveal that there is indeed a statistically confirmed advantage in the experimental group learners' critical thinking, use of metacognitive reading strategies, as well as reading comprehension.

Key Words: Critical Thinking, Metacognitive reading strategies, Reading Comprehension, Poetry, Young Learners

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1. Introduction

Critical Thinking (CT) is a process that involves reflective and purposeful judgment when dealing with a problem and increases the chances of reaching a logical conclusion (Dwyer *et al.,* 2014). The importance of its instruction has been underscored by various researchers and education councils (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2005; Australian Council for Educational Research, 2002; Butler *et al*., 2012; Halpern, 2003; Ku, 2009), as it allows individuals to cope with complex information and become more adept at problem-solving and decision-making in the real world. CT is also described as a metacognitive

process (Dwyer *et al.,* 2014; Magno, 2010), as it heavily relies on self-regulation, which is also an essential component of Metacognition (MC), the process of thinking about thinking (Flavell, 1979).

Poetry is a literary genre that encourages self-exploration and self-expression but has often been considered too difficult for young EFL readers (Nichols *et al.*, 2018). A considerable amount of research, however, has shown that teaching it can be beneficial for young EFL learners' reading skills (Khansir, 2012; Norris, 2011; Rasinski *et al.*, 2015) because poetry is enjoyable, easily accessible, memorized and recited. Furthermore, it is non-threatening, due to its usually limited length and the fact that it allows for multiple interpretations (Calfoglou, 2004/2019).

The present article focuses on an area of research that has received very little attention so far, namely, whether the two interconnected concepts of CT and MC can be promoted through the teaching of poetry within a Primary School EFL context and whether this development can have an impact on learners' reading comprehension. The article is laid out as follows: Section 2 deals with the theoretical context of the present discussion in relation to the concepts of CT, MC and poetry. Section 3 presents the methodology employed in the research and the intervention designed and section 4 discusses the data obtained. Section 5 offers some concluding remarks.

2. The concepts of Critical Thinking, Metacognition and Poetry in relation to Young Learners' Reading

2.1. Critical Thinking and Metacognition

CT is a rather elusive concept, which has received multiple interpretations (Cottrell, 2017; Davies, 2015; Facione, 2013). It has been generically defined as the objective analysis and evaluation of an issue in order to form a judgment and its origins can be traced in the teaching of Socrates, who established the importance of asking questions that aim to explore meaning beyond appearances (Atabaki *et al.*, 2015). In the 20th century, the idea of CT can be found in the writings of John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Paulo Freire, Peter Facione, Richard Paul. The 1980s witnessed a revival of interest in inquiry and CT in the United States. Fundamental questions regarding the definition of CT and its component skills, the most effective teaching methodology and how it could be assessed called for an answer.

The theoretical underpinnings of CT can be traced in not just one but three distinct academic disciplines: philosophy, psychology and education (Almeida & Franco, 2011). The philosophical approach focuses on the qualities of an ideal critical thinker and standards of thought that relate to the application of rules of logic. More specifically, Paul (1992, p. 9) refers to "perfections of thought" and Facione (2013) describes the ideal critical thinker as someone who possesses open-mindedness, flexibility, willingness to suspend judgment and to consider various points of view. The psychological approach examines the types of actions critical thinkers perform and defines CT as a list of skills. Halpern (1998, p. 450), for example, defines CT as "the use of those cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome" and Willingham (2007, p. 8) as "seeing both sides of an issue, being open to new evidence that disconfirms your ideas, reasoning dispassionately, demanding that claims be backed by evidence, deducing and inferring conclusions from available facts, solving problems, and so forth". Finally, the educational approach has heavily relied on the

work of Benjamin Bloom and his associates (1956). His taxonomy of cognitive skills - with knowledge, comprehension, application at the bottom and analysis, synthesis, evaluation at the top (cf. Anderson *et al.*, 2001) - has long provided educators with a valuable framework for teaching higher order thinking skills, synonymous for many with CT (Kennedy *et al.*, 1991).

Therefore, it seems that providing a concrete definition of CT for the purposes of the present article cannot rely on one single approach but should rather exploit elements from all three previously discussed perspectives. One of the definitions that endorse a holistic view of CT has been provided by Matthew Lipman, a philosopher and educator[1], who argues that "critical thinking is skillful, responsible thinking that facilitates good judgment because it (1) relies upon criteria, (2) is self-correcting and (3) is sensitive to context" (1988, p.39). Lipman explains that any claim or opinion is vulnerable unless it is supported by reasons, namely criteria of a reliable kind, which are relevant to specific domains. They can form the basis of a comparison and can be formal or informal. CT is also self-correcting in the sense that it tries to identify its own weaknesses and repair faulty procedures. One final characteristic of CT is that it adapts to specific contexts and takes various parameters into account. It is also assumed in the present work that, in accordance with the psychological approach, CT is clearly evident in certain skills or abilities. Researchers from all three schools discussed earlier usually agree on the following abilities (Lai, 2011), which have also been selected as the focus of this research:

o   analyzing evidence
o   making inferences
o   evaluating
o   making decisions

From an educational perspective, these skills seem to correspond to Bloom's higher order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

Another form of reflective thinking can be traced within the realm of MC, which has become popular in educational and cognitive development theories within the last fifty years. Perhaps the most well-known definition of MC is "thinking about thinking" (Flavell, 1979, p. 906). Etymologically speaking, the prefix meta- implies a higher or second level of cognition, knowledge about knowledge. John Flavell[2] first used the term in 1976, when he referred to MC as "the active monitoring and consequent regulation" of information processing activities, "usually in service of some concrete goal or objective" (p. 232). He, therefore, implied that MC is both intentional and conscious thinking that can either precede or follow any cognitive activity.

Metacognitive strategies are used to monitor cognitive progress. Their main aim is to ensure that a cognitive goal (for example, understanding reading material) has been achieved. Possessing good metacognitive skills and awareness means that a person can successfully oversee one's own learning process, plan and monitor ongoing cognitive activities and compare cognitive outcomes against internal or external criteria (Cartwright *et al.*, 2017; Flavell *et al.*, 2002; Hargrove & Nietfield, 2015).

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[1]Lipman is considered to be the founder of Philosophy for Children, an educational movement that proposes enhancing children's learning through inquiry and the exploration of ideas.
[2]Flavell was an American developmental psychologist who was influenced by Piaget.

There seems to be a close connection between MC and CT, although researchers fail to agree which concept includes or precedes the other. For example, Flavell (1979) and Martinez (2006) agree that CT is inherent in MC. Flavell argues that "critical appraisal of message source, quality of appeal, and probable consequences needed to cope with these inputs sensibly" can lead to "wise and thoughtful life decisions" (p. 910), while Martinez considers CT to be one of three types of MC, the other two being metamemory[3] and problem solving. Kuhn (2000) maintains that CT is equivalent to MC. Van Gelder (2005) and Willingham (2007), on the other hand, view MC as a component of CT, when they describe the ability to use appropriate strategies at the right time as an important CT skill. A critical thinker is, therefore, someone who uses metacognitive strategies to control one's thinking processes. Halpern (1998) presents MC and CT together in a model. She defines MC as the ability to use knowledge to direct and improve thinking skills. It is, therefore, safe to say that the two concepts seem to complement or support one another, as they both aim towards a higher quality form of thinking.

As the main focus of the present article is the reading skill, it is also necessary to discuss the concept of Critical Reading (CR), which, of course, presupposes the application of CT. Freire (1983, p. 5) sees "the actual act of reading literary texts…as part of a wider process of human development and growth" and his claim that "reading the world precedes reading the word" underscores the importance of perceiving the intrinsic relationship between text and context. For Freire (*ibid*, p. 11), "reading always involves critical perception, interpretation and *re-writing* what is read". CR in this light seems to be a frame of mind readers adopt in their attempt to explain the world and the word, rather than a set of strategies or skills. It differs from traditional reading in that it allows a wide range of interpretations rather than focusing on definite meanings (Wallace, 2001).

Several researchers have suggested that one of the most effective ways to achieve CR and ultimately enhanced reading comprehension is through the instruction of metacognitive reading strategies (Afflerbach *et al*., 2015; Duffy, 2002; Kamgar & Jadidi, 2016; Morshedian *et al.*, 2016; Pressley, 2002; Tracey & Morrow, 2006). Pressley and Gaskins (2006) use the term 'constructively responsive reading' to refer to metacognitive reading and describe what good readers do *before*, *during* and *after* reading. In the first stage, good readers identify a purpose for reading and preview the text by noticing certain features, such as its title and length. During reading, they may skim or slow down, reread, take notes or make mental notes, update and relate ideas, constantly monitor and repair comprehension, draw inferences, construct mental images and evaluate. After reading, good readers think back to what they have read and revise it, while continuing to ask questions.

This description is similar to Urquhart & Weir's (2016). According to them, *planning* corresponds to the pre-reading stage and heavily relies on prediction, *monitoring* is what readers do while reading by constantly asking themselves questions about the characters, the author's message, their own level of understanding and, finally, *evaluating* is the post-reading stage, in which readers express their opinion about the text, the message and what helped them to understand.

The present article focuses on the development of the following metacognitive reading strategies within the stages of planning, monitoring and evaluating, which seem to have

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[3]This term generally refers to awareness of one's memory and of how it works.

increased relevance to aiding Young Learners (YL) towards becoming more proficient readers (Ahmadi *et al.*, 2013; Chatzipanteli *et al.*, 2014; Temur *et al.*, 2010; Whitebread *et al.,* 2010):

PLANNING	MONITORING	EVALUATING
Activating background knowledge Predicting	Self-questioning	Connecting ideas (cause-effect) Determining importance

Table 1. Metacognitive Reading Strategies selected

This categorization, however, is not a strict one, in the sense that some of these strategies can be used in more than one stage and are potentially omnipresent (Veenman, 2015).

In the case of YL specifically, it seems that, unlike earlier research, which considered children incapable of more complex cognitive processes, there is fertile ground for an early start, which will ensure better initiation to CT. Recent research suggests that there is indeed room for teaching CT in primary school, as younger children have been observed to think critically (Florea & Hurjui, 2015; Gelerstein *et al.,* 2016; Heyman & Legare, 2005; Silva, 2008; Willingham, 2007). Similarly, recent work has demonstrated that younger students do exhibit metacognitive thinking abilities (Bares, 2011; Conklin, 2012; McLeod, 1997; Schneider, 2008; Schraw and Moshman, 1995; Whitebread *et al.*, 2009) and can, therefore, receive and benefit from metacognitive strategy instruction.

2.2. The case for poetry

The present article argues that both CT and metacognitive instruction can be effected through the teaching of poetry, despite the fact that it has a reputation for being a rather inaccessible as well as deviant genre (Adamson, 2016; Khansir, 2012), which "departs from linguistic norms" (Lazar, 1993, p. 104). First of all, in relation to YL, there seem to be numerous advantages to using poetry. The content of poetry may offer young readers the opportunity to approach serious and difficult topics in a light-hearted way, as the length, rhythm and rhyme of a poem may encourage the reader to interact and play with it (Ara, 2009). Furthermore, the relative ease of mastering the reading of a short poem gives YL a sense of achievement and self-efficacy that is essential for ensuring further progress (Rasinski *et al.*, 2015; Rasinski, 2017). Young readers' affective engagement with poetry is also very important, as it facilitates learning (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). According to Carter (2013, p. 4), "reading a poem should arouse feelings and opinions in a child and lead to the need to express and share them". This need for expression, in turn, may promote linguistic competence and enhance comprehension (Creely, 2018).

Poetry can also be used to improve young EFL students' fluency, word recognition and vocabulary (Vardell *et al.*, 2006) and to promote phonemic awareness (the ability to identify and manipulate the sounds of language) and phonics (the ability to translate the written form of words into their oral representation) (Nichols *et al.*, 2018). Unlike other literary forms, most poetry is meant to be recited in front of an audience. In order for a poem to be meaningful, multiple rehearsals need to take place, leading to fluency improvement (Rasinski, 2014). Moreover, the form of most poems is quite friendly to young readers, as there is ample blank space, while some even possess a particular shape, thus appealing to the senses and paving the way for better comprehension (Rasinski *et al.*, 2016). Last but not least, young readers' encounter with English poetry provides them with a unique

opportunity to explore cultural elements and ideologies that will not only facilitate comprehension but will also lead to intercultural awareness (Thaler, 2016).

In terms of CR, the form of most short poems encourages children to learn them by heart, just as they learn the lyrics of their favorite songs, which allows for the discovery of multiple meanings through repetition (Medwell *et al.*, 2014). According to Hess (2003, p.20), "entering a literary text, under the guidance of appropriate teaching, brings about the kind of participation almost no other text can produce … when we read, understand, and interpret a poem we learn language through the expansion of our experience with a larger human reality".

As regards CT and MC, the ambiguity of meaning encountered in most poems encourages reflection and discussion. Discussing the multiplicity of meanings and choosing one that fits personal preferences or that meets specific requirements imposed by a task is an exercise in problem solving, an essential component of CT (Dwyer *et al*., 2014; McPeck, 2016). Forming connections and relationships among parts of a poem, as well as among other poems on similar themes, seems to enhance learning and CT (Halpern, 1998; Fowler, 2019), along with metacognitive reading strategies (Eva-Wood, 2008). The latter, as we saw earlier, are activated when readers monitor the state of their understanding of a text. The challenge involved in making sense of a poem entails that readers will make the most of strategies such as activating their background knowledge and predicting (by using clues like pictures and titles), asking themselves appropriate questions (Blau, 2014) as they read and reread the poem, connecting ideas within a poem (like cause and effect) and determining their importance.

In addition, the use of unconventional language or the unusual treatment of a topic adds an element of surprise in the reading process and invites readers to engage in CT as they try to resolve feelings of imbalance (Halonen, 1995). Poetic language constitutes a major incentive for using inferencing and prediction, as readers usually need to resort to background knowledge and context in order to reach an interpretation of the poem (Cushing, 2018). Metaphors, for instance, demand inferential thinking and critical analysis, which, in turn, play a crucial role in processing experiences in a complex multicultural society (Hankin, 2017; Pistol, 2018). Being critical thinkers in such a society entails the ability to see and experience different perspectives on various issues and this is what reading poetry generously offers, without neglecting the issue of aesthetic appeal (Powell, 2021). It is this connection to CT, MC and reading comprehension that will be explored in some detail in the present work.

3. The intervention

3.1 The method

The research questions addressed in the present work are founded on the hypothesis that poetry teaching can have beneficial effects on the development of young learners' CT, metacognitive reading skills and L2 reading skills generally and are as follows:

1. Can the teaching of poetry enhance Young Learners' Critical Thinking and, more specifically, analyzing evidence, making inferences, evaluating and making decisions?

2. Can the teaching of poetry enhance Young Learners' use of metacognitive reading strategies, and, more specifically, activating background knowledge, predicting, self-questioning, connecting cause with effect and determining importance?
3. Does the development of Critical Thinking and metacognitive reading strategies through poetry have an overall positive effect on Young Learners' reading comprehension?

In order to answer the questions above, the present study pursues action research, whereby the researcher exposes experimental group learners to the new programme and compares their performance with that of a control group, whose members receive standard instruction (Mertler, 2016). Actually, both groups were given instruction on the use of the specific strategies targeted but, unlike the experimental group, which practised these strategies within a poetry context, the control group learners dealt with ordinary coursebook reading input.

The specific study followed a mixed methods approach, as it employed both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection so as to triangulate results and achieve greater validity (Dornyei, 2007). Quantitative research tools involved a needs analysis questionnaire, a pre- and post-intervention reading comprehension test, a pre- and post-intervention CR test and a pre- and post-intervention metacognitive reading strategies questionnaire. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 21.0) was used for the data analysis. More specifically, regarding all three research questions, paired samples t-tests were used to determine whether there were statistically significant differences, between performance at the beginning and at the end of the intervention, within the control and the experimental group. Statistical significance was set at the 0.05 level. Qualitative data collection, on the other hand, involved a teacher's observation checklist, which was completed at three different points during the intervention.

The subjects of this research were 32 students divided into two groups of 16 in the sixth grade of a primary school in New Artaki, Evia. They had been learning English at school for 3 years, with three 45-minute lessons per week. All students were monolingual, except one, who had recently come from India. Their competence level ranged from A1 to B1 (Council of Europe, CEFR, 2001, 2018). A pre-instruction reading test[4] was administered to both groups to determine reading ability levels and make a comparison with post-reading test performance possible. The intervention spanned a period of three months.

3.2 The process

The intervention involved three stages: the *pre-instruction*, the *instruction* and the *post-instruction* stage. In the pre-instruction stage, the experimental group students answered a needs analysis questionnaire designed to explore their reasons for learning English, their familiarity with poetry and their preferences in relation to poetry themes. The results obtained from the questionnaire provided the teacher with insight into what kind of themes and tasks would be more suitable for the specific learners. This was used as a compass in the choice of poems and was meant to make the poetry input provided more appealing. In addition, both groups had to answer a metacognitive reading questionnaire (Appendix A), which focused on the use of the metacognitive strategies selected. Finally, they all took a CR test (see Appendix B for sample tasks), designed to explore the use of the CT skills selected.

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[4] The reading section of a sample Cambridge A2 Flyers exam.

The instruction stage consisted of two distinct phases. In the *first phase*, both the control and the experimental group received four 90-minute lessons of explicit strategy instruction, designed in accordance with the Gradual Release of Responsibility model, which was originally proposed in Pearson and Gallagher (1983). In the first lesson, that of 'modeled instruction', the teacher explained the strategies while thinking aloud and the students listened without participating. The lesson started with an introduction to the skills and strategies selected. The teacher used the think-aloud technique to show learners how to use the specific strategies, while learners were provided with the text (an article) the teacher read without the commentary so that they could focus on listening and completing a checklist. The checklist contained a few statements that referred to the strategies targeted and students had to decide whether the teacher actually used the specific strategies or not. For instance, the first item on the checklist asked students whether the teacher tried to infer content from the title of the text.

The second lesson, the one of 'shared instruction', was designed to encourage the learners' participation in the teaching process. It therefore involved a much shorter and simpler text (a letter of complaint). The tasks were also less complex than those in other lessons and group work was specifically required. The lesson opened with a task aimed at reminding students of the strategies being taught in the previous lesson and went on with tasks that required students to practice the specific strategies. For instance, the students were given the opening of the text ('Dear…') and were encouraged to predict its content.

In the third lesson, that of 'guided practice', students practiced the strategies collaboratively and received guidance. Two texts (film reviews) on the same topic but of different levels of difficulty were employed. Providing students with multiple texts intended to facilitate comparison and connection of ideas[5]. Learners were also provided with 'a manual' that meant to familiarize them with the idea of working on their own. In essence, this was a task sheet which provided very explicit instructions on how to think when approaching a text and guided learners through the process step by step so as not to intimidate them. For instance, in the planning stage learners were encouraged to focus on the titles and pictures accompanying the texts so as to predict the content. In the monitoring stage, the tasks required multiple readings of the texts before learners decided on differences and similarities between them. In the evaluating stage, learners were asked to find evidence that supported their evaluation of the writers' treatment of the subject.

There was also a self-evaluating component introduced in the final stage, which was included in all the lessons that followed. It aimed to encourage learners' self-awareness in terms of using the strategies selected and to improve future performance. In the final lesson, that of independent practice, students applied the strategies independently and received feedback at the end. A biographical text was used and the tasksheet followed a pattern like the one used in lesson 3. The level of difficulty was intentionally lower to encourage students' independent practice at this point. There was also a feedback component at the end, identical with that used in the previous lesson, aiming to help learners realize which strategies were used in each task and whether their original answers should be revised. All four lessons relied on group work and teacher, as well as peer, scaffolding. The materials involved authentic, non-literary texts in the belief that, once

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[5] Lipman's (1988) definition of CT (see section 2.1) entails the use of comparison and connection based on specific criteria in order to support any claim or opinion.

learned, these skills can be used across contexts and with various genres (see Lipman's (1988) definition of CT, section 2).

In the *second phase*, the experimental group received 8 lessons of poetry-based strategy instruction (see Appendix C for sample tasks), whereas the control group continued with standard coursebook instruction and were encouraged to practice the reading strategies taught when approaching course book texts. The poems (Appendix D) in the experimental group lessons of the second phase were organized in pairs of thematic affinity and in accordance with the students' preferences, revealed through the needs analysis questionnaire. They were selected following a set of general criteria (adapted from Hadaway & Young, 2010), namely *topic familiarity, language level, textual support,* and *level of cultural fit*. More specifically, the learners' own choice of themes (as recorded in the needs analysis questionnaire) formed the basis for selecting sixteen poems, divided into eight thematically related pairs, to ensure that there was a certain degree of *topic familiarity*. The *language level* of the poems was also carefully considered, and students were provided with glossaries whenever this was thought necessary. An effort was made not to inundate students with too many abstract terms and new vocabulary was introduced in meaningful, contextualized ways. For instance, most of the poems were accompanied by pictures and there was extensive use of inferencing and activation of the students' background knowledge in the planning stage. *Textual support* was yet another criterion considered and most of the poems selected were either accompanied by visuals or used wording which allowed students to infer the meaning of new vocabulary. Moreover, in relation to the *level of cultural fit*, the poems presented aspects of other cultures that were already quite familiar to the students.

At the post-instruction stage, all the learners had a reading comprehension test administered to them. This test was similar to the diagnostic reading test in the pre-instruction stage and aimed to record any significant improvement in the learners' overall reading performance. They also responded to the metacognitive reading questionnaire (also used at the pre-instruction stage) and took a different version of the CR test[6], both of which aimed to reveal the extent to which students had benefited from strategy instruction and whether the poetry lessons had resulted in further improvement for the experimental group.

The teacher's observation checklist was also completed for the experimental group at three different points during the study: at the beginning of Phase 2, halfway through Phase 2 and at the end of Phase 2.

4. The data

4.1 Poetry and CT

The project targeted the development of specific CT strategies, namely analyzing evidence, making inferences, evaluating, and making decisions, and had hypothesized a CT advantage for the poetry instruction learner group. This hypothesis seems to have been borne out by the data collected through the pre- and post-intervention CR test and analyzed using paired

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[6] Different versions of Reading and CR tests were selected for the pre- and the post-intervention stage because presenting learners with the same text input might compromise results in a number of ways.

sample t-tests. Thus, as can be seen in Table 2 below, the experimental group improved substantially between the pre- and the post-instruction stage: t (15) = -5.239, p= .000 (M=65.31, SD=32.89 at the pre-stage vs. M=83.75, SD=22.69 at the post-stage), while the control group showed no statistically significant differences between the pre- and the post-intervention performance: t (15)= -1.856, p= .083 (M=64.06, SD=29.62 vs. M=65.44, SD=28.16):

Critical Thinking	Stage	*M(%)*	*SD*	*t*	*p*
Control group	pre-intervention	64.06	29.62	-1.856	.083
	post-intervention	65.44	28.16		
Experimental group	pre-intervention	65.31	32.89	-5.239	.000
	post-intervention	83.75	22.69		

Table 2. Pre- and post-intervention differences in Critical Thinking within each group (paired samples t-test)

As far as the qualitative data are concerned, a comparison between the various stages of the observation suggests that the experimental group made considerable progress from the beginning to the end of Phase 2. For instance, in Lesson 1, it was observed that students *rarely* made any inferences related to the poet's intended message or evaluated poems in relation to specific criteria. Some students said that they could see no point in trying to infer the poet's message beforehand. As instruction carried on, however, there was significant improvement in the frequency of use of these skills. In Lesson 4, students were observed to *sometimes* be able to infer the poet's message and to evaluate the poems. They spent considerable time discussing these decisions in the planning and the evaluating stage. Finally, in Lesson 8, on completion of the intervention, most students were *often* able to perform the specific skills. For example, on receiving the worksheet, they would immediately look for clues that might help them reach certain decisions concerning the poems.

It might therefore be safe to argue that the control group students, who had received only explicit instruction in the CT skills selected, using non-literary texts, and who had continued with standard coursebook instruction, did not benefit as much as the experimental group, who had received poetry-based in addition to explicit instruction. It seems that the poems helped them to achieve the kind of thinking that Lipman (1988) defined as skillful, self-correcting, and sensitive to context (see section 2). Interaction with poetry can, therefore, be said to promote critical perception and interpretation of what is read, which, according to Freire (1983), as we saw in section 2, is the essence of CR. Learners were expected to re-write what the poet had originally written and were encouraged to approach meaning from any angle they found most suitable. This freedom may have contributed to their reaching a higher level of CT than the control group students, who were exposed to non-literary texts in Phase 1. By the end of the poetry lessons, some students remarked that they had never thought poetry would be so engaging or that it would help them reflect on their own lives: "I used to think poetry is boring but now I think it's different", "I never thought poetry is so interesting", "After these lessons I try to write my own poems in English".

These findings also seem to support the idea that poetry possesses certain characteristics which make it ideal for the teaching of CT. Poetic meaning is ambiguous and encourages reflection and problem-solving, essential to CT (Dwyer *et al*., 2014; McPeck, 2016). Reading

poetry encourages the formation of connections not only between parts of a poem but also with other poems on similar themes, that is, hypertextually (Halpern, 1998). Readers may also employ as many strategies as possible to meet the challenge of making meaning out of a poem and heavily rely on inferencing (Hankin, 2017; Pistol, 2018). For instance, the learners involved in this study had to guess the meaning of unknown words based on context in all the poetry lessons. Apart from inferencing, the students also relied on the analysis of evidence, such as titles, pictures and form, in order to predict the meaning of the poems. For example, they predicted the meaning of the 'little tree' poem (Lesson 5, Phase 2), just by reading the title. In addition, they constantly engaged in evaluation and decision-making processes, when they were asked to decide whether they liked a poem or not and to justify their choices. For instance, the poems in lesson 6 ('This is Just to Say' by W.C.Williams and 'The Little Boy and Old Man' by Shel Silverstein) initiated a fervent discussion leading to the conclusion that family relations should be like those portrayed in the poems (open, sincere and sympathetic).

Finally, the results also suggest that the mixed approach to the instruction of CT skills, where teachers combine explicit, stand-alone CT instruction with applying these skills in a specific subject (poetry in this case) and which has been advocated by various researchers (Behar-Horenstein & Niu, 2011; Edwards, 2017; Ennis, 2013, 2018; Facione, 2013), might be more effective than others. Moreover, as the participants in the specific context had no previous engagement with CT, it seems that explicit instruction coupled with poetry-specific instruction had maximum impact on them.

4.2 Poetry and MC

The intervention targeted the development of specific metacognitive reading strategies, namely activating background knowledge, predicting, self-questioning, connecting cause with effect and determining importance and the quantitative data (Table 3) collected through the pre- and the post-intervention metacognitive reading strategy questionnaire show that there were no statistically significant differences in metacognitive reading strategy use between the control group's pre-intervention and post-intervention performance: t (15)= 1.775, p= .096 (M=49.36, SD=12.58 at the pre-stage vs. M=48.75, SD=12.33 at the post-stage). By contrast, there was a significant difference in the scores for metacognitive reading strategy use between the pre- and the post-intervention stage for the experimental group: t (15)= -7.383, p= .000 (M=46.75, SD=13.10 at the pre-stage vs. M=61.37, SD=10.77 at the post-stage). In other words, experimental group learners achieved a significantly higher score after the intervention:

Metacognitive Reading Strategy Use	Stage	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*
Control group	pre-intervention	49.36	12.58	1.775	.096
	post-intervention	48.75	12.33		
Experimental group	pre-intervention	46.75	13.10	-7.383	.000
	post-intervention	61.37	10.77		

Table 3. Pre- and post-intervention differences in Metacognitive Reading Strategy Use within each group (paired samples t-test)

As regards the observation checklist, the findings obtained reveal that there is indeed a connection between exposure to poetry and improved metacognitive reading strategy use. For instance, in Lesson 1, it was observed that students *rarely* had pictures in their mind before reading a poem or reread it to clarify certain points, whereas by the time they had reached Lesson 8, they were *often* able to create mental images before reading a poem and they always reread it to make things clearer. In addition, in Lesson 1, it was observed that they could *sometimes* rank poems according to how important they believed they were in relation to specific criteria and could justify their choices, while by the end of Lesson 8, they were *often* able to do so.

These results indicate that there may be a connection between systematic exposure to poetry and enhanced metacognitive reading strategy use, as the students in the experimental group, who had received poetry-based instruction in specific metacognitive reading strategies on top of explicit instruction using non-poetic texts, seem to have benefited more than the control group students, who had not been exposed to poetry. Such a conclusion is consistent with other relevant research into the effects of teaching poetry on MC. For instance, Threlfall (2013) considered how poetry can be used to aid adult students towards a process of self-guided reflection. Cloonan *et al.* (2011) showed that students can increase their metacognitive awareness through the teaching of poetry. Giovanelli (2017) used poetry reading to develop students' MC. Simecek and Rumbold (2016) suggested that poetry response journals can lead to students' enhanced engagement with subject matter as well as self-monitoring. The present study could therefore be added to those above while also establishing a beneficial effect for YL as well.

4.3 Poetry and Reading Comprehension

The study also examined the overall potential effect of the development of CT and metacognitive reading through poetry on Young Learners' Reading Comprehension. For this purpose, students in both groups took a reading test at the pre-instruction and then again at the post-instruction stage and the data were subjected to statistical analysis. It was hypothesized that any improvement in reading comprehension would be generally reflected in the difference in students' scores in the reading tests before and after the intervention. In support of this hypothesis, paired samples t-tests (Table 4) revealed that there was indeed significant improvement for the poetry group (t (15)= -5.233, p= .000, M=49.13, SD=29.19 at the pre-stage vs. M=62.25, SD=24.71 at the post-stage), whereas for the control group there was no significant change (t (15)=-1.600, p= .130, M=51.06, SD=29.23 at the pre-stage vs. M=53.25, SD=27.92 at the post-stage). An eloquent example of the change brought about in the experimental group is that of a weak student who managed to climb from a score of 19% before the intervention to 47% after the intervention:

Reading comprehension	Stage	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*
Control group	pre-intervention	51.06	29.23	-1.600	.130
	post-intervention	53.25	27.92		
Experimental group	pre-intervention	49.13	29.19	-5.233	.000
	post-intervention	62.25	24.71		

Table 4. Pre- and post-intervention differences in Reading Comprehension within each group (paired samples t-test)

These findings suggest that the development of specific CT skills and metacognitive reading strategies through poetry may indeed have an overall positive effect on students' reading comprehension performance, since the experimental group students, who had shown the greatest improvement in CT skills and metacognitive reading strategy use (see Tables 2 and 3), also seemed to benefit the most in terms of reading comprehension. This conclusion agrees with the findings of earlier related research into the potential effects of teaching poetry on reading comprehension. Rasinski *et al.* (2016), for example, suggested that repeated practice in poetry reading might be very effective in improving struggling readers' performance. Norris (2011) successfully used poetry instruction to improve her learners' reading comprehension. Khansir (2012) analyzed the benefits of incorporating poetry in reading instruction. Schillinger *et al.* (2010) designed and taught an intensive poetry course to secondary students, which led to improved reading performance. What is of interest in the present study is that it contains evidence that may point towards concurrent CT skills, metacognitive reading strategies and general reading comprehension improvement through poetry among YL.

5. Concluding remarks

The statistical data presented above point to a strong relation between poetry instruction and enhanced performance in the CT skills selected. By the end of the intervention, the poetry group learners had become better critical thinkers and readers according to Lipman's (1988) definition of CT, in the sense that they used specific criteria, introduced to them through the tasks, to reach reasonable and responsible conclusions, they went through a process of constant self-correction and they learned how to pay attention to different contexts. The data also seem to indicate that poetry instruction facilitated learning and applying the metacognitive reading strategies selected and that it encouraged students to think about the way they think, which is consistent with Flavell's (1979) definition of metacognitive thinking referred to earlier. The nature of poetry seems to have fostered the process of discovering multiple layers of meaning in every reading. Finally, in relation to the overall effect of the development of CT skills and metacognitive strategies through poetry on Young Learners' reading comprehension, the data show that improved CT and metacognitive performance was accompanied by enhanced reading comprehension. By the end of the instruction process, the experimental group learners were able to find their way through a text with considerable ease and were no longer intimidated by longer, unfamiliar texts. They had learned how to rely on their CT skills and metacognitive reading strategies in order to explore possible meanings and reach sound decisions.

Future research could focus on larger samples of primary school students in other grades as well and examine whether these results can be replicated. The experimental lessons designed for the specific intervention could be used as a poetry module incorporated in the coursebook. In addition, the length of the intervention could be extended, and participants could be tested at some point after the intervention to see whether the effect is a long-lasting one. The effect of poetry could also be explored among older students or in comparison with other literary genres. Alternatively, future studies could further explore whether the specific CT skills and metacognitive reading strategies, once acquired, can be transferred to other genres as well or whether other instructional frameworks can also contribute to the development of CT and metacognitive reading strategies. Finally, it would

be interesting if the development of other strategies through poetry instruction could be examined.

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Appendix A

METACOGNITIVE READING STRATEGIES QUESTIONNAIRE (PRE- AND POST-INTERVENTION)
Read each statement carefully. Think about what you do before, while and after reading. Put a tick in the box that is true for you.

METACOGNITIVE READING STRATEGY	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
1. I make connections between what I know and what I will read about.					
2. I ask myself questions to make sure I have really understood something.					
3. I make connections between different ideas in a text.					
4. I understand what the author's main message is.					
5. I read the text again and again to understand some points.					
6. I have some pictures on my mind before reading a text.					
7. I find connections between something that has happened in the text and why it has happened.					
8. I use clues such as title, subtitle and pictures to predict what the text is about.					
9. I understand what is and what is not important in a text.					
10. I use context clues to predict the meaning of words I don't know.					

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Appendix B
SAMPLE TASKS FROM THE CRITICAL READING TESTS

making inferences

A) You are going to read two texts. Read their titles and try to guess what they are about. Look at the Glossary for the meaning of some words.

TEXT A: **"Spiders Cover Greek Coast In 1,000-Foot Web For Mating"**

This text is probably about_____.

TEXT B: **"This Farm Collects Spider Webs for Art"**

This text is probably about_____.

The first text is accompanied by the photo of a huge thick spider web covering everything on the coast.

Can you guess what photo might accompany the second text?

Describe it in very few words:
_____.

analyzing evidence

B) Now read the two texts carefully. Try to think of at least one similarity and one difference between them.

One similarity is that
_____.

One difference is that
_____.

evaluating

C) Can you understand whether the writers of these texts like spiders or not? Explain what makes you think so:

The first writer
_____

because _____.

The second writer
_____

because _____.

Which of the two texts was easier for you to understand? Why?
_____.

Which of the two texts was more interesting to you? Why?
_____.

making decisions

D) Which of the two texts would you choose if you wanted to surprise a friend? Explain:

I would choose _____ because
_____.

Which of the two texts would you choose if you wanted to encourage someone to look for more information? Explain:

I would choose _____ because
_____.

Appendix C:

SAMPLE TASKS FROM THE POETRY LESSONS

Planning

A. You are going to read two poems by two different poets. The first poem is called *'Uphill'* and the second one *'The Road Not Taken'*. They share a common theme. Can you guess what they are both about? Discuss with your partners and write your answers:

_____.

B. Choose one of the following themes as the most likely. Justify your choice:

a) love   b) seasons   c) travelling   d) life and death   e) friendship

C. Think about some things that we need to know when we start travelling. Circle some of the possible things that may worry a traveller:

a) the weather   b) the route   c) accommodation (where to stay)   d) means of transport   e) expenses (cost)   f) things to pack   g) duration of the journey (how long it will be)   h) destination (where you want to go)

Monitoring

A. The first poem follows a question-answer pattern. There are 8 questions followed by an answer. Here is a list of the questions the poet asks:

1. Will there be beds for me and all who seek?
2. Will the day's journey take the whole long day?
3. Does the road wind up-hill all the way?
4. May not the darkness hide it from my face?
5. Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?
6. But is there for the night a resting place?
7. Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?
8. Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?

Are there any similarities between them and your answers to Task C (Planning stage) above?

B. Read through the answers given and try to put the questions back to their original place so as to reconstruct the poem:

C. Read through the second poem and try to find what this poet's main worry is:

_____.

D. Read the poem once again and see if you can answer the following questions:

Were the two roads the same or different? Which words or phrases make you think so?

_____.

Does the poet regret (feel sorry for) his decision? Which words or phrases make you think so?

_____.

E. Look back at your answer to Task B in the Planning stage. Do you think there is a further, symbolic theme hidden in these two poems?

Evaluating

A. Listen to the two poems being recited as you read them again.

a) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yLnG6ONl9Bw

b) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUaQgRiJukA

Which of the two do you prefer and why?

_____.

B. Which of the two poets do you think was inspired by their Christian beliefs to write their poems? What makes you think so?

_____.

C. Which of the two poems do you find more suitable to inspire travelling? Why?

_____.

D. How well did I read and understand?
a) Perfectly   b) Very well   c) Quite well   d) Well   c) Not so well
What strategies worked well for me?
What strategies did not work for me?
The strategies in order of usefulness (number 1 being the most useful to me in understanding the texts):
_____. Analyzing evidence
_____. Making inferences/Predicting
_____. Evaluating
_____. Making decisions
_____. Activating background knowledge
_____. Self-questioning
_____. Connecting ideas (cause-effect)
_____. Determining importance
What should I do next time? Do I need some help for next time?

Appendix D

THE POEMS USED IN PHASE 2
Lesson 1: *'Uphill'* by Christina Rossetti and *'The Road Not Taken'* by Robert Frost
Lesson 2: *'The Tyger'* and *'The Lamb'* by William Blake
Lesson 3: *'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud'* (also known as 'Daffodils') by William Wordsworth and *'In a Station of the Metro'* by Ezra Pound
Lesson 4: *'Hug o'War'* by Shel Silverstein and *'A Poison Tree'* by William Wordsworth
Lesson 5: [little tree] by E. E. Cummings and *'Easter Day'* by Oscar Wilde
Lesson 6: *'This is Just to Say'* by W. C. Williams and *'The Little Boy and Old Man'* by Shel Silverstein
Lesson 7: *'Ozymandias'* by Percy Bysshe Shelley and *'Ozymandias'* by Horace Smith
Lesson 8: *'Home is so Sad'* by Philip Larkin and *'The Shortest and Sweetest of Songs'* by George MacDonald

Aspasia Deliligka (aspa72deli@yahoo.gr) holds a B.A. in English Language and Literature from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and an M.Ed. in TESOL from the Hellenic Open University (2019) with distinction. She has been working as an EFL teacher in the public sector for the last 26 years. Her interests include teaching English Literature to Young Learners and intercultural education.

Christine Calfoglou (xkalfog@yahoo.gr | kalfoglou.christina@ac.eap.gr) was a University of Athens MA in Translation and Translation Theory scholar and obtained a PhD in Applied Linguistics and Language Acquisition from the University of Athens with distinction. She is currently teaching on the M.Ed. TESOL programme of the Hellenic Open University, for the Literacy module of which she has written a volume. Her research interests and published work include distance learning methodology, L2 writing instruction, grammar, the semiotics of language and art, poetry translation, translation theory.