Teaching Shakespeare to Language Learners

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Overview

Part 1:
• Why teaching Shakespeare?
• Shakespeare & Language
• Shakespeare & Context

Part 2:
• Working with Language
• Developing the Four Skills
• Promoting Independent Learning

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Why Shakespeare?

• Why not?
• **Relevance**: relationships & topics that are related to our lives
• **Context**: sustained engagement with characters & situations
• **Challenge**: cognitive engagement & sense of empowerment
• **Learning**: language awareness & vocabulary building

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How difficult is Shakespeare’s language?

a. Very difficult
b. Quite difficult
c. Quite easy
d. Very easy
Shakespeare & Language

The Myths:

• The quantity myth
• The invention myth
• The style myth
• The translation myth
The Quantity Myth

- End of 16th century: 150,000
- 21st century: 600,000
- Fluent speaker: 50,000
- Shakespeare’s vocabulary: 20,000

‘It is not as much the number of words we have as what we do with those words that makes the difference between an ordinary and a brilliant use of language.’ (p.3)
The Invention Myth

- First recorded user in the *OED*
- 2,200 words first recorded in Shakespeare
- 1,700 plausible Shakespearean inventions
- About half of them stayed in the language

- *anthropophagy, assassination*
- *ear, eye, lip, mouth, scandal, word*
- *uncomfortable, uncompasionate, uneducated, unaware, undo* (314)
The Style Myth

**Style**: vocabulary, sentence length, structure, word-order, sounds, interaction between speakers

- Characters' styles: groups or individuals
- Genres: tragedies, comedies, history plays
- Early and later plays
- Language choices between alternatives in particular lines
The Translation Myth

- 10% of Shakespeare's grammar is likely to cause a comprehension problem
- 95% of Shakespeare’s vocabulary are words we know and use every day
- only 5% of all different words in all Shakespeare’s plays will give you a hard time
If quantity, unusual words, and ‘style’ are not the major problems, why do so many people find it difficult to understand Shakespeare?
Shakespeare & Language

What we need to understand Shakespeare:

• Pay attention to the language
• Use our imagination
• Think creatively
• Rethink the sentences
• Watch & read – read & watch
• Use the Shakespeare Glossary
THINGS WE SAY TODAY WHICH WE OWE TO SHAKESPEARE:

“KNOCK, KNOCK! WHO’S THERE?”
“IN A PICKLE”
“SET YOUR TEETH ON EDGE”
“FAINT HEARTED”
“SO-SO”
“GOOD RIDDANCE”
“SEND HIM PACKING”
“LIE”
“FIGHT FIRE LOW”
“BAITED WITH FIRE”
“BREATH”
“WEAR YOUR HEART ON YOUR SLEEVE”
“NOT SLEPT”
“FULL CIRCLE”
“ONE WINK”
“WHAT’S DONE IS DONE”
“NAKED TRUTH”
“BREAK THE ICE”
“WILD LAUGHING STOCK”
“BREATHED HIS LAST”
“HEART OF HEARTS”
“SEEN BETTER DAYS”
“VANISH INTO THIN AIR”
“MAKES YOUR HAIR STAND ON END”
“DEAD AS A DOORNAIL”
“FOR GOODNESS’ SAKE”
“GREEN EYED MONSTER”
“PLAY / PLAY”
“THE WORLD IS MY OYSTER”
“BE ALL / END ALL”
“BE ALL”
“A SORRY SIGHT”

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Shakespeare & Context

- **Historical context:** Elizabethan England
- **Literary context:** Elizabethan theatre
- **Cultural references:** people, places, situations
- **Intertextuality:** the Bible and Classical Literature
Working with Language

• Memorable language: language in context
• Creative use of language: word classes, affixation, phrasal verbs, idioms
• Figurative language: metaphor, similes, oxymoron
• Sentence construction: parallelism and hendiadys
• Pragmatics
Developing the Four Skills

• **Reading**: extracts, adaptations (graded readers), summaries, extra information, working with translations, literary criticism

• **Listening**: selected scenes, trailers, film adaptations, recorded stage performances, interviews
Developing the Four Skills

- **Speaking:** reading groups, class discussions, presentations, group debates, performances
- **Writing:** summaries, paraphrasing, creative writing, essay writing
Promoting Independent Learning

- Web quests
- Group projects
- Internet interactive tools
- Putting on a play
- Library search
- Flipped lessons
- MOOC: Exploring Shakespeare
- Shakespeare Lives 2016
References

Thank you!

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