

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE, STUDENTS ARE THE PLAYERS: Teaching Shakespeare and English Language Learners

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Abstract: English language learners struggle to read and comprehend the work of William Shakespeare in secondary schools across the country. Yet, these students from diverse backgrounds continue to be required to read this literature. This article offers a review of arguments made to remove Shakespeare from the curriculum as well as reasons for the continued inclusion of the work in classrooms. It summarizes the findings revealed during an expert teacher's panel at the University of Dallas Second Biennial Shakespeare Conference (2016). The traditional method of teaching Shakespeare's work is analyzed, and practice proven, research-based strategies are provided for teachers to implement in the classroom to better support student reading and comprehension of Shakespeare's plays. Expert teachers discouraged the use of parallel texts in the classroom and believe that by choosing appropriate instructional methods focused on scaffolding enhanced literacy skills and active constructivist learning, the timeless themes and characters of Shakespeare's plays can be learned, mastered, and appreciated by modern diverse student bodies.

Keywords: Shakespeare, English language learners, parallel text, scaffold strategies

Introduction

Harold Bloom, Yale professor and author of *The Western Canon: Books and School of the Ages* (2001) suggests, "We read deeply for varied reasons, most of them familiar: that

we cannot know enough people profoundly enough; that we need to know ourselves better; that we require knowledge, not just of self and others, but of the way things are" (p. 29). Through reading William Shakespeare's comedies, histories, romances, tragedies, and poems, secondary students may arrive at increased knowledge of themselves and others in the world, and learn to better understand the enduring questions of humanity. To that end, the literary works of Shakespeare are integral components of the Western literary tradition and incorporated in the secondary language arts curriculum. Indeed, his works are included in textbooks and are the focus of parallel-texts, graphic novels, and films.

Debating Shakespeare's Inclusion in Diverse Classrooms: The Literature

The percentage of Texas students identified as English language learners (ELL) grew from 15.9 percent in 2006-07 to 18.9 percent in 2016-17, and the percentage of students receiving bilingual or English as a second language (ESL) instructional services increased from 14.8 percent to 18.8 percent (Texas Education Agency, 2017b). These ELL students require special services and classroom supports through scaffolding learning experiences to meet their language and educational needs. A veritable alphabet soup of acronyms exists to describe ELLs in the schools; one might also hear ELLs referenced as ESL or English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). A student may have Limited English Proficiency (LEP) and not even be classified as ESL. Students whose parents have denied ESL services or those who have exited the ESL program may be still be considered LEP.

Perhaps as a result of this increase in multicultural, multi-ethnic students, the teaching of the Western canon and its emphasis on difficult to read Shakespeare is viewed as irrelevant to modern ELLs, many of color, as a pervasive example of the oppressive voice of the dead, white, European, male. American schools house increasingly diverse student populations. In Texas, the overall number of Hispanic, African-American, and Asian

students surpass non-Hispanic white students and include more at-risk students, those who live in poverty and more who require English-language instruction (Texas Education Agency, 2017c). Popular arguments voiced by observers including students and teachers are that students believe they have little with which to identify when reading Shakespeare (Bhageria, 2015; O'Meara, 2015; Powell, 2014).

Increasing the identity divide, Texas teachers are overwhelmingly female and white (Texas Education Agency, 2017a). Some secondary English teachers do not perceive themselves as reading teachers, the job of elementary school teachers. They view themselves as content area teachers, whose content is literature (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007). English teachers select texts students read, based upon their perceptions of student interest, reading level, and readings mandated by state standards. Many teachers find it difficult to accommodate everything in the curriculum, which forces them to make choices about what to include (Friese, Alvermann, Parkes, & Rezak, 2008). Teachers might choose to minimize Shakespeare's writings in the classroom if they perceive students are not interested in his work and/or that students cannot access the text because of readability, and teachers themselves are stretched to include other literature mandated by the state.

The debate over Shakespeare's continued inclusion in the Western canon extends beyond Texas borders, and Lanier (2010) asserts that interest in Shakespeare's work is a global phenomenon that will continue to expand to meet market demands. The market is influenced by its largest population share, young people. Lanier says, "One of the many reasons there has been a drive to recuperate the nature of Shakespearean cultural capital is that Shakespeare remains so integral to the curriculum, and that centrality guarantees a market" (p. 105). The position is confirmed in a Canadian study of tenth grade students in a large, multicultural high school. Despite difficulties reading play texts (*Twelfth Night*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Romeo and Juliet*), students almost unanimously agreed that Shakespeare should be studied because of his educational, historical, and literary status (Balinska-Ourdeva, Johnston, Mangat, & McKeown, 2013). The curriculum debate further played out in the *Washington Post* as one urban teacher argued against the continued teaching of Shakespeare because his work was outdated, difficult to understand, and irrelevant to multicultural students; better, she argued, to teach literature from other traditions, e.g., Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia (Strauss, 2015a). In response, a rural teacher argued for Shakespeare's inclusion in the secondary curriculum in order to provide students with cultural capital they might not otherwise possess and because of the timeless and complex themes, diverse in race and gender (Strauss, 2015b).

It is possible that schools and teachers end up depriving ELL students of challenging texts. Petrosky and Reid (2004) described secondary English classrooms in Texas as driven by a tested curriculum. They maintain that teachers instruct what is state tested and ELLs and other students reading below level, who need the most exposure to substantive texts, receive, in fact, the least (p. 2). This may be detrimental academically and socially. Hoyt Phillips says, "Students without at least a surface-level understanding of classic texts run the risk of missing social and cultural references made to these works" (as cited in Chiariello, 2017, p. 27). Indeed, many English common phrases and words find their origin in Shakespeare (Boston, 2016), so choosing not to teach this work may serve to further exclude already marginalized ELL students.

To facilitate answers to this situation, the University of Dallas hosts a biennial conference dedicated to Shakespearean studies aimed at how best to justify and support the teaching of Shakespeare to modern diverse students, to claim Shakespeare's rightful place in the Western canon. We believe that the best way to support teaching Shakespeare in the secondary English classroom was to solicit the expertise of accomplished English teachers and listen to how they successfully teach Shakespeare in contemporary classrooms. If Bloom is correct and the goal of the canon is to motivate students to know themselves and others, and to better understand human's persistent questions, teachers are challenged to teach Shakespeare and the rest of the canon well and with fidelity. English teachers endeavor to communicate their love for language in their classrooms, to stimulate in their students an appreciation for English and literature as art forms. For teachers attending the conference, it is not acceptable that students leave school with no appreciation for, or comprehension of, Shakespeare's work. For work as complex as Shakespeare's, this can be achieved only through effective teaching methods. The purpose of this article is to explore what the conference revealed—the continued value of teaching Shakespeare to modern secondary students—and to provide engaging strategies from experts and experienced teachers to accomplish the task.

Context

In the fall of 2016, the University of Dallas hosted "As You Like...As You Like It!," a biennial Shakespeare Conference for approximately 150 guests. The conference invited Dallas area college professors, performing artists, university students, and local high school teachers and their students to experience Shakespeare's *As You Like It* through a weekend of readings, performances, and panel discussions. For the high school students, a college professor conducted a master class on the play's Act One, Scene One and the students participated in a monologue recitation contest. Conference attendees listened to the keynote address: "Shakespeare's Language—*As You Like It*," delivered by Dr. Ralph Cohen, co-founder of the American Shakespeare Center in Staunton, Virginia, and author of *ShakesFear and How to Cure It: A Handbook for Teaching Shakespeare* (2007). College professors, teachers, and artists participated as panelists to discuss and learn more about the Bard's work during sessions of "The Play as Read," "The Play as Performed," and "The Play as Taught." The panel discussion "The Play as Taught" featured three Metroplex teachers, with more than fifty combined years of successfully teaching Shakespeare's work to high school students (see Table 1). The panelists' collective wisdom focused on practical classroom strategies and produced three common themes to answer this question: How might teachers best present Shakespeare's work to 21st century students? They acknowledged the difficulty that modern ELL secondary students experience when reading Shakespeare's work, the importance of using appropriate textual supports during reading, and the need for students to perform the readings.

Classroom Teaching

Current research supports classroom practices that every teacher can adopt to engage ELL students and facilitate classroom learning. Gonzalez (2017) breaks this into four areas: make input comprehensible, teacher modeling, use of visuals, and make output comprehensible. When making input comprehensible, it is important for the teacher to speak clearly and more slowly, using gestures, movement, and multiple learning modalities to

Table 1: “The Play as Taught” Panelists

Teacher	School Type	Presentation Title	Content Summary
Brett Langsather	Public school	“Worth Doing Badly”	Secondary ELL students struggle when reading Shakespeare’s work. The language is dense and arcane, difficult for them to comprehend.
Monica Cochran	Catholic school	“Should High School Students Read Shakespeare Without Modern Crutches?”	Best practices point to modifying instruction, without relying on parallel text. Teachers should utilize active reading strategies to support student reading comprehension of primary text.
Don Carlson	Private Independent school	“The Soul of Lively Action”	Instructional strategies such as total physical response are engaging and work to improve ELL students’ comprehension of Shakespeare’s words.

explicate vocabulary. Instructor modeling through teacher reading and thinking aloud with Shakespearean text is important before beginning student independent reading. Teacher- and student-made graphics posted around the classroom help anchor ELLs learning too. Lastly, spoken and written output needs to be comprehensible. One way to accomplish this is for students to work cooperatively reading text and completing reading support activities.

“No Reading for Fun”

Modern classrooms are diverse spaces and the public-school teacher panelist commented that even high achieving ELL students struggle with the traditional way of teaching Shakespeare (Langsather, 2016). Traditionally, the teacher lectures on the plot, characters, setting, and themes of the play as well as introduces the class to Shakespearean figurative language. Then, students independently read the text, perhaps accompanied by an audio version, and end with a class quiz. Finally, a movie adaptation of the play may be shown (Bowman, 2016). The panelist elaborated that his students who labor with English mastery and whose home culture is not part of the Western tradition struggle with the language and ideas presented in Shakespeare works. Additionally, he lamented that for these students, there was “. . . no reading for fun” (Langsather, 2016).

Teachers report that high school students struggle to read Shakespeare, despite the text, obviously written in English. Students ignore Shakespearean language and themes, attempting to derive meaning from the words (Spangler, 2009). Yet, the teacher panelists reported the need to persist in teaching Shakespeare, arguing that Shakespearean work is sustainable, something which has been continuously read and performed since the 16th century (Carlson, 2016; Cochran, 2016; Langsather, 2016). In the modern day, Shakespeare’s plays are studied and reinterpreted in multiple cultural and political contexts. His characters and plots are timeless, real human beings demonstrating a range of conflicts and emotions. Through encouraging the study of these timeless themes, teachers enable their students to transcend narcissism and an ugly world (Langsather, 2016). It may well be that it is more important than ever for students to read and appreciate Shakespeare. But how best to accomplish the task? In his practical handbook, Cohen (2007) proposes ten rules for actively and creatively teaching Shakespeare. Teachers who follow these guidelines enable their students to gain confidence and to better analyze characters, text, and themes. See Appendix A for Cohen’s rules. To accomplish this Herculean task, the teacher panelists provided strategies that work in their high school classrooms.

Strategies for Teaching Shakespeare: Expert Teachers Teach

“Modern Crutches”

In addition to audio and film versions of Shakespeare works, students and teachers now have easy access to parallel text versions of the work through SparkNotes, *No Fear Shakespeare*, or Barron’s *Shakespeare Made Easy*, as well as curriculums which accomplish the same task, written for classroom use. Parallel text versions place emphasis on Shakespeare’s stories, rather than his words; the beauty of the work is found in the words Shakespeare assembled to communicate his stories (Scotese, 2009). Resoundingly, panelists advocated the removal of parallel text “crutches” from the classroom (Carlson, 2016; Cochran, 2016; Langsather, 2016), arguing students benefit from struggle with the text, ultimately enabling better comprehension.

Instead, panelists advocated setting a purpose for reading, based on the timeless themes of the work. Modern teenagers have opinions and experience with Shakespearean themes like ambition, loyalty, guilt, and corruption, which serve to define the work. Then, an audio or visual recording of a text soliloquy is played, followed by a student reading the same soliloquy aloud while the class follows with the text (Herold, 2016). Next, students are encouraged to read, perhaps in small groups, as each take parts. A panelist noted the importance of students reading the text multiple times, annotating as they go. This teacher also suggested beginning instruction with Shakespeare’s poetry, reading the work as complete sentences, not line by line (Cochran, 2016).

Panelists discussed the inclusion of multiple performances of a play, utilizing both dramatic readings and film versions of the studied play so students are able to visualize the written text. Indeed, such instruction leads to increased critical examination, as students view different directorial interpretations and possible meanings, outside the playwright’s (Spangler, 2009).

“Get Them on Their Feet!”

Shakespeare’s work was written for performance, before a lively and interactive audience; the element of “play” is key to understanding his work. To adequately teach Shakespeare, students must get up on their feet and engage in the action (Carlson, 2016). Students report their increased ability to understand and appreciate the archaic language once they assume a character. A high school junior wrote, “When you read it by yourself silently, you’re examining Shakespeare from outside and trying to look in. When you are acting it out, though, you are inside the play, looking out at the world. Then it comes alive” (Sawdy, 2009). To be sure, when

engaging with Shakespeare's words in performance, students gain enhanced textual understanding. There are free online sources authored by Shakespearean authorities to assist teachers in developing classroom activities. The American Shakespeare Center, the Folger Shakespeare Library, and Shakespeare's Globe all offer educational resources and tips for interactive instruction.

Scaffold the Material

Teachers should scaffold activities to get students behind Shakespeare's words, so that the body can interpret the written and multiple meanings encompassed by the statements (Carlson, 2016). Panelists agreed that cutting scenes might be an important strategy for ELL students who struggle with reading and the meaning of Shakespeare's language (Carlson, 2016; Cochran, 2016; Langsather, 2016). Supplementary support activities include attacking the words in a monologue by looking up dictionary meanings and then playing a game in pairs to repeat and paraphrase monologue parts. Another scaffold suggestion is practicing delivery with ABCD skills: A—end of line support where students kick a box, exactly on the final line syllable; B—scansion, scanning the monologue for rhythmic patterns, marking strong and soft word syllables; C—phrasing, disregarding punctuation and looking for thoughts; and D—breathing, carefully examining the punctuation and acting it out while reading a monologue (e.g., comma=stomp a foot, colon=slap your thigh, semicolon=snap fingers). This method gets students up, moving, and interacting with the text. A final suggested scaffolding activity involves independent student research of the play and monologue, based upon Uta Hagen's "Six Steps" in character preparation, as adapted by Anna Carlson from Trinity Valley School in Fort Worth, Texas. See Appendix B for Six Steps Research Activities. In addition to panelist suggestions, more classroom resources are available at the websites mentioned previously, which include study guides, fact sheets, and video clips for teacher implementation.

Conclusion

In Texas' ethnically diverse schools, which contain more at-risk students living in poverty who require English-language instruction, there is an increasingly urgent need for the successfully implemented strategies outlined in this article. All students will benefit from enhanced Shakespeare instruction, and struggling ELL students need increased structure to successfully embrace Shakespeare's work, enabling them to access challenging text and increasing their cultural capital (Boston, 2016; Chiariello, 2017). For the English teacher panelists at the University of Dallas conference, there was never a question of removing Shakespeare from the curriculum. They believe that Shakespeare represents the best of the Western literary tradition and that his writing and influence on the literature produced since he lived mandate its teaching (Ludwig, 2013). They believe they must assist their ELL students to better understand and appreciate the language nuances expressed in Shakespeare's plays. Through following Cohen's ten rules for teaching Shakespeare (2007) and choosing appropriate instructional methods focused on scaffolding enhanced literacy skills and active constructivist learning, these expert teachers affirm that the timeless themes and characters of Shakespeare's plays can be learned, mastered, and appreciated by modern diverse student bodies. Through teaching Shakespeare to our secondary ELL students, they grow in knowledge of themselves and others in the world, acquire understanding of man's eternal questions, and are better equipped to participate in their world (Oatley, 2011).

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Appendix A

Cohen's (2007, p. 70) Rules for Teaching Shakespeare

1	Do connect the works to yourself.
2	Do stress your own problems with the play.
3	Do stress staging.
4	Do stage scenes using students.
5	Do organize group readings.
6	Do deal with small moments, small speeches, specific words.
7	Do deal with the "dirty" stuff.
8	Do stress character, but in your students' terms.
9	Do confront Shakespeare's poor speakers.
10	Do deal with sound.

Appendix B

Six Steps Research Activity

Adapted by Anna Carlson, Trinity Valley school, Fort Worth, Texas
 University of Dallas Biennial Shakespeare Conference "As You
 Like . . . As You Like It!"
 November 12, 2016

1. WHO AM I?
 What is my present state of being?
 How do I perceive myself?
 What am I wearing?
2. WHAT ARE THE CIRCUMSTANCES?
 What time is it? (Year, season, day? At what time does my selected life begin?)
 Where am I? (City, neighborhood, building, room? In what landscape?)
 What surrounds me? (Immediate landscape, weather, condition of the place and nature of the objects within it?)
 What are the immediate circumstances? (What just happened, is happening? What do I expect or plan to happen next and later on?)
3. WHAT ARE MY RELATIONSHIPS?
 How do I stand in relationship to the circumstances, place, objects, and other people related to my circumstances?
4. WHAT DO I WANT?
 What is my main objective? Immediate need?
5. WHAT IS MY OBSTACLE?
 What is in the way of what I want?
 How do I overcome it?
6. WHAT DO I DO TO GET WHAT I WANT?
 How can I achieve my objective?
 What's my behavior?
 What are my actions?

Shakespeare Monologue Research

Adapted by Anna Carlson, Trinity Valley School, Fort Worth, TX
University of Dallas Biennial Shakespeare Conference “As You
Like . . . As You Like It!”
November 12, 2016

1. Play
 - A. Name of the PLAY
 - B. SETTING of the play
 - C. Your character’s NAME
 - D. Main character’s RELATIONSHIP to your character
 - E. CONFLICT
 - F. THEMES found in the play
 - G. Quick story SYNOPSIS

2. Monologue
 - A. What ACTION takes place BEFORE your monologue?
 - B. What ACTION takes place immediately
 - C. AFTER your monologue?
 - D. What is your CHARACTER’S OBJECTIVE?
 - E. What OBSTACLE does your character face?