

Teaching Shakespeare to Language Learners on All Stages

by [Lisa Peter](#)

Teaching Shakespeare to language learners does not sound like a good idea at first: These plays and poems are more than 400 years old, which means that they are fairly regularly based on views of the world we no longer subscribe to, and on top of that they use language that differs from modern day English. So how come so many English teachers want to incorporate his work into their language teaching, and, what is more, how can Shakespeare be successfully adapted to different language levels?

The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-upon-Avon has several years of experience running special educational sessions for English language learners, both at the Shakespeare Centre in Stratford and online as Skype lectures and Q&A sessions. We offer interactive sessions and talks to language learners on all levels, ranging from short and active introductions for beginners to more challenging talks for more advanced students. Our teaching takes place in a very special environment (i.e. a heritage and museum setting), but we encounter exactly the same challenges as language teachers around the world in their classrooms: We have to make Shakespeare interesting to 21st-century teenagers, and we need to deal with the language barrier of Early Modern English.

Focus on Your Learning Outcome

There are many ways of how you can “do” Shakespeare in the language classroom, so a first valuable question to ask is what exactly you want to achieve with Shakespeare in your teaching. Are you doing Shakespeare because one of his plays is on the curriculum? Or perhaps you would like to focus on other things relating to Shakespeare, for example, on Shakespeare as a cultural icon, or on Shakespeare’s influence and admiration around the world. Or you might want to approach Shakespeare from a language point of view and explore the many words, idioms, and phrases that were introduced into the English language via his plays.

- **Activity:** Shakespeare’s Interesting Idioms (intermediate)
- **Activity:** Quoting Shakespeare (advanced)
- **Activity:** Shakespeare’s Invented Words (beginners)

Activities that focus on Shakespeare’s life and times are particularly suitable for learners on lower language levels. For example, Shakespeare’s family tree (PDF) can be used on a beginners’ level to introduce or to repeat the vocabulary concerning family relations. For students on a lower intermediate level, the same material can then form the basis for a slightly more elaborate exploration of Shakespeare’s immediate family (PDF): What do we know about his father, his children, and his grandchildren? How many scandals were related to this particular family? This latter question forms an excellent way into a writing exercise, in which the learners come up with their own short report for the gossip pages of the local newspaper.

- **Activity:** Exploring Shakespeare’s Family Tree (beginners)
- **Activity:** Become a Tudor Journalist (intermediate)

Let It Leap off the Page

Shakespeare's plays were written to be performed and to be experienced as part of the audience, not read alone and scrutinised in detail. That many of Shakespeare's passages reveal a poetic complexity when studied does not mean that this is the be-all and the end-all of teaching Shakespeare; some people prefer close reading, while others want to feel the words on their tongue or explore the plays in other ways. Therefore, allow for a variety of approaches that make text work and analysis leap off the page. Visual representations of what is going on in the plays are a great way to distil information: character overviews, infographics, or even short comics make for great projects. Models of a Shakespearean theatre or theatre props like a dagger or a poison bottle can function as talking points for storytelling exercises.

Most people now say: Let's perform Shakespeare; turn your classroom into a drama workshop! If you can do that (and if you want to do that), go for it—but it's only one possible way of getting creative with Shakespeare. Not every student is an actor, not every teacher is a workshop facilitator—and that is fine. There are lots of other ways your learners can make Shakespeare their own. One of them is creative writing; for example, let your students speculate about the gaps in Shakespeare's biography. There is a period of several years in Shakespeare's early career, the so-called Lost Years, where nobody knows what he did, how he earned his living, or even where he was. Similarly, we don't know what Shakespeare died of at the age of 52—so let your students speculate what could have happened.

- **Activity:** Shakespeare Wanted (intermediate)

Whichever activity you choose to let your students get creative, the best results, in our experience, stem from those activities where students get the chance to make Shakespeare their own and to playfully explore the story and characters.

The Language Issue

But what about the language? In fact, Shakespeare's English is not entirely outlandish to Modern English ears. Yes, it is different, and yes, it is difficult in places—it would be wrong to deny this—but with a short introduction to the major differences between Modern English and Early Modern English, quite a few hurdles can be lowered considerably. Once your students have these grammatical Lego bricks, they will find it a good deal easier to make their way through a sonnet, identifying the really obsolete words Shakespeare uses on the way.

Pointing out the similarities between Shakespeare's English and Modern English is crucial—and makes for a fascinating study in language development and the influence of literature. Once again, this is something that can be done for several language levels: lower levels can focus on single words, or on short phrases, whereas more advanced students will enjoy discovering idioms and quotes that originated in Shakespeare's works.

When tackling the language issue in plays, focussing on key scenes in the original and using simplified versions for the more functional scenes in the play seems to work best.

- **Activity:** Early Modern English vs Modern English (upper intermediate–advanced)

Get the Poet off the Plinth

“Shakespeare is good for you” is not a great argument to use with your students if they don’t understand why you put this 400-year old stuff in front of them. Teach understanding and enjoyment, not blind admiration—Shakespeare is terrific, in spite of so many people telling you that he is.

So, to sum up, when you decide you want to do Shakespeare in the language classroom, here are a couple of suggestions: It’s ok not to do everything; it’s fine to use simplified versions, translations, graphic novels, Manga Shakespeare—whatever helps your students to enjoy the stories. Whatever you want to focus on, whatever you want to use Shakespeare for, go for it. He’s not the easiest writer to teach—your lesson planning will need some research and shaping of preexisting material—but the sense of achievement your students will feel when they’ve mastered their bit of Shakespeare—in whatever form—will be immense. “I can do Shakespeare; this is for me, and it is fun” is a great legacy to leave with your students.

The activities and teaching resources referred to and many more are available for free on [*Teaching Shakespeare Around the World*](#).

Take a look at more than a hundred of free Shakespeare resources for primary school children and join our national celebration of Shakespeare in primary schools 20–26 March 2017, [*Shakespeare Week*](#).

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