



Shakespeare in EFL Class at Tertiary Level: Difficulties and Possible Solutions

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Abstract

There are perceptions that literature may not be suitable for language teaching and learning in EFL classes, let alone Shakespeare. But, in the shifting paradigms of ELT, the aim of reading literature has been changed. Now-a-days increasing attention has been given to the possibility of incorporating literature in EFL/ESL classes. So, the present paper at first, briefly discusses the importance of incorporating literature as well as the literary texts of Shakespeare for teaching English as a foreign language at tertiary level. Shakespeare is often avoided by EFL teachers considering it too complex for their students. Therefore, the next sections of the paper aim at identifying some difficulties in understanding Shakespeare's language; proposes some suggestions to minimise those superfluous difficulties skillfully and thus, exploit the literary texts of Shakespeare especially for the first year undergraduate students of English departments in Bangladesh at the very beginning of their undergraduate studies. Finally, it highlights some strategies with examples to be used in EFL classrooms that can benefit the learners of English departments in many ways.

Keywords: *Shakespeare, EFL, ELT, Tertiary Level, learner*

1. Introduction

The present paper is an attempt to highlight the importance of using Shakespeare's texts as effective materials in teaching English as a foreign language at tertiary level. In Bangladesh, the students of English Departments study literature and of course, Shakespeare traditionally i.e. just as literary masterpieces. But, the present paper proposes the concept of incorporating Shakespeare's writings in English Departments at the very beginning of their undergraduate studies and the purpose is to exploit his literary texts to teaching basic language skills and other language areas like vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. This will help the novice students to cope up with the canon of British and American literature. As Farida and Sinha (2012) state: "students in Bangladesh who entered the English Department faced great difficulty in tackling literature. These students lacked literary reading, foreign culture knowledge as well as appropriate linguistic competence" (p. 82). So, at the very beginning of undergraduate studies, before studying different literary texts of foreign writers critically and creatively, this practice will: help the students overcome hesitations; help them appreciate literature; make them familiar with foreign culture and become aware of ESP vocabulary.

Moreover, learning literature through familiar practices like re-writing, prediction activities, role-playing, group activities (as they did all these activities at SSC & HSC level) will make them confident and prepare them for studying literature critically, creatively and independently. Finally, once they are habituated to unlocking Shakespeare's language, will be able to appreciate and enjoy any other literary masterpieces of any writer in their future courses of studies.

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1.1. Background of the Study

A literary work cannot properly be understood without a thorough knowledge of language which is its medium of expression. As Leech (1996) states, “we generally suppose that the literature cannot be examined in any depth apart from the language, any more than the language cannot be studied apart from the literature” (p.1). In fact, literary studies deeply rely on linguistic study and from this viewpoint literature was initially the main source of input for teaching English in language classes in the era of GTM (Grammar-Translation Method), but since then it has been dropped down the pedestal. In the era of CLTA (Communicative Language Teaching Approach), literature was neglected and more attention was given to dialogues and conversations which were more practical and visible in the real world situation (Khatib et al. , 2011). But, “since the middle of the 1980s increasing attention has been given to the possibility of teaching literature in ESL/EFL classes after a long period of neglect” (Duff & Maley, 1991; cited in Mate, 2005, p. 52). Now-a-days researchers in the field of ELT have emphasized the benefits of using literature for language teaching and learning purposes as Sage (1987) claims that “many teachers consider the use of literature in language teaching as an interesting and worthy concern” (cited in Rahman, 2013). Thus, the present researcher also believes that there are a number of ways in which studying literature in EFL classes can promote critical thinking, analytical ability and intercultural awareness of the students as well as benefit them in terms of language acquisition.

1.2. Rationale

1.2.1. Reasons for Using Literary Texts in Language Teaching

Many scholars emphasized the benefits of exploiting literature for language teaching and learning purposes. As Khatib et al. (2011) states “Publications which laid a red carpet for the return of literature were prolific at this time including:

- Carter & Burton, 1982
- Maley & Moulding, 1985
- Brumfit and Carter, 1986
- Collie & Slater, 1987

As the main focus of the present paper is to discuss how to incorporate Shakespeare’s texts as effective materials in EFL classes, here I would like to mention only the main points that different researchers and scholars stated as benefits and justification for incorporating literary texts in language classroom. Here are a few points: Authenticity; Motivation; Cultural/Intercultural Awareness and Globalization; Intensive/Extensive Reading Practice; Sociolinguistic/Pragmatic Knowledge; Grammar and Vocabulary Knowledge; Language Skills; Emotional Intelligence (EQ); Critical Thinking. These are the main benefits that the above mentioned researchers highlight in favour of using literature for language teaching and learning purposes.

Today teaching language through literature is essentially viewed as teaching language through any other written material. Therefore, any standard activity that is used with non-literary texts can be used with literature as well, such as re-writing, prediction activities, role-playing and so on” (Carter & Walker, 1989; quoted in Mate, 2005; p. 52).

Again, the most important benefits of using literature in a language class as identified by Carter and Waker (1989; cited in Mate, 2005) are its ambiguities and indeterminacies that provide natural opportunity for discussions and different interpretations to be expressed, which is among the central goals of CLTA. So, in the era of CLTA, if it is possible to incorporate literature as an effective language teaching material, why should we deny it? One may think that studying literature in language classes means it will be a teacher-centered class as it was in the GTM. But, “opposed to earlier method this attitude entails manipulated literary texts (e.g. cut into lines, acted out), language-based student centeredness to involve students with the text, or pair/group work



instead of one-way communication dominated by the teacher” (Carter & Walker, 1989; quoted in Mate, 2005; p. 52). “Teaching literature also means that [t]exts may also be presented in fresh contexts by juxtaposition with other texts or media, or made to serve purposes for which they were not originally intended” (Duff & Maley, 1991; quoted in Mate, 2005; p. 52).

1.2.2. Why Shakespeare as a Reading Material in EFL Classrooms

Now, the question is why Shakespeare’s texts for this purpose especially, at the very beginning of undergraduate studies. This section of the paper is a summary of what can be considered as the merits of using Shakespeare’s work in EFL classrooms. While using literature in a language class most of the researchers usually suggest using simplified texts, i.e. texts which are simplified for language learning purposes; using easy texts, i.e. texts which are by nature more readable than others and are appropriate to the level of the learners; using young adult texts because they are stylistically less complex. So, one may find it an ambitious idea to read Shakespeare in EFL classroom. But, the present paper differs in this regard because of the following reasons:

(i) First of all, the present paper proposes to use Shakespeare at the tertiary level, especially for the first year undergraduate university students of English Departments of Bangladesh. These students have had the experience of studying English as a compulsory subject for long twelve years. Moreover, recently the NCTB of Bangladesh has included some literary texts (e.g. poems, legends, short stories, memoirs etc.) in the new “Higher Secondary English textbook” from the academic session 2015-2016 and suggest to exploit the texts to trigger a variety of language activities. So, as a continuation of this attempt if we really want to incorporate some literary texts with the specific purpose of teaching the basic language skills at the very beginning of the undergraduate studies, why not those texts should be Shakespeare’s. Crystal (2003; cited in Yen, 2010) claims that by studying the texts of Shakespeare, students learn “how it is possible to explore and exploit the resource of language in original ways, displaying its range and variety in the service of the poetic imagination” (p. 34).

(ii) In the present education system of Bangladesh at the university level, after completing four years honours, the students of English departments are offered two different options: either Linguistics and ELT or Literature for their MA courses. So, the students who are graduates in English literature and choose teaching profession at the secondary and higher secondary levels in future, face difficulties in handling CLTA classes. As Barman and Basu (2013) state:

There is often a lack of focus on pedagogy in B.A. (Hons.) and M.A. in English programmes in Bangladesh and students coming out of these programmes often have good knowledge of English literature but very little ability to design pedagogic tasks for language skill development (p. 252).

So, I feel that this proposed course will be able, even if partially, to help those students and give them an idea about language teaching and learning.

(iii) We must remember the fact that Shakespeare is the greatest asset of English literature. He is, without a doubt, one of the most or perhaps the most famous English poet and playwright that have ever lived. In the words of Samuel Johnson, “Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life.” Again, “Shakespeare was not of an age, but of all time,” “he was not of a land, but of all lands.” He is universal. His supremacy lies in his universality- his brilliant dialogues, his style, dramatic speeches of characters, the brilliant play of words, metaphors and lyrical passion in his blank verse - all have achieved a universal appeal.

(iv) Shakespeare played a major role in the transformation of the English language. At the time he was writing, the early modern English language was less than 100 years old. No dictionaries had yet been written and most documents were still written in Latin. Shakespeare contributed over 3,000 words to the English language because he was the first author to write



them down. Of this number more than one tenth or 1,700 were used for the first time (Royal Shakespeare Company, n.d.).

(v) William Shakespeare used language to : create a sense of place; seize the audience's interest; explore the widest range of human experience. In fact, he was a genius for dramatic language (Cina, 2013).

(vi) Shakespeare is a master of language. An estimated 3000 words and expressions that we use today originated in Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. (Paris, 2007).

(vii) The *Oxford English Dictionary* credits Shakespeare with introducing nearly 3000 words into the language (Garret, n.d.). Scholars estimate Shakespeare's vocabulary at between 25,000 and 29,000 words, nearly twice that of the average college student according to Russ McDonald in *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare* (cited in Belschner, 2007). The normal working vocabulary of a speaker of English is around 5,000 words.

(viii) In the words of Louis Marder, "Shakespeare was so facile in employing words that he was able to use over 7,000 of them- more than occur in the whole *King James Version of the Bible*- only once and never again" (Garret, n.d.). It's only about his *Vocabulary*. Besides this, there are many other things like his *Wordplay* and *Rhetorical Devices* which can inspire, excite, motivate and enrich our EFL learners.

1.3. Understanding Shakespeare's Language

To the playgoers of Shakespeare's time, a successful drama was one that combined variety of action with variety of language. The language used in Shakespeare's plays is obviously quite different to our modern usage. Typical of Elizabethan times, the dialogues used would have accurately reflect everyday language, though used in a more poetic and lyrical style. As Rowse states, "In contrast to the vast majority of the modern plays, most Shakespearean drama is *poetry rather than prose*." We also have to remember another fact that his language was written to be *performed* and not judged as a literary contribution. When *spoken on stage*, much expression and action aids in determining the meaning of what is said. The language is a visual one where every word and phrase creates an image for the reader to understand the concept.

1.4. What to do about the Difficulties

1.4.1. Difficulties to be Considered before Teaching Shakespeare

Sullivan (1991) identifies two major difficulties of literature in language teaching:

(i) Linguistic Difficulty: Literature texts often contain archaic, figurative and less frequently used words which make it difficult for non-native student learners, particularly those at lower levels of proficiency.

(ii) Demand on Background Knowledge: Learners may need a lot of background knowledge about English history and culture to be able to interpret some texts" (cited in Barman & Basu, 2013; p.251).

Again, what age group is suitable to teach Shakespeare for the successful and useful utilisation of his writings (especially for language teaching activities) is a matter of consideration. In answering this question Mate (2005) states:

The group has to be at least on the intermediate (or rather upper-intermediate level) level, preferably containing students with language proficiency exams. Taking into consideration that, and the general literary studies, the optimal group to teach Shakespeare to consists of students in the 11-12th grade (pp. 56-57).

However, while writing this paper, the above mentioned *facts and difficulties* have been taken into consideration and it is expected that in the context of Bangladesh, the students for whom my proposed course is suggested, will not face such difficulties as - they are the students



of English departments; they get themselves admitted in English departments through a tough and competitive admission tests and last but not the least, they need to study several dramas and poems of Shakespeare compulsorily as the core literature courses in their honours syllabus.

1.4.2. Role of the Teacher Using Shakespeare as Reading Material

Before reading Shakespeare the teacher should be prepared to re-read and remembers that no one understands everything about Shakespeare on the first, second, or even tenth reading (Belschner, 2007). They next point that the teacher needs to remember that the purpose of reading Shakespeare for this course is to teach the basic language skills. Rahman(2013) says: when using literature in the language classroom, skills should never be taught in isolation but in an integrated way.

However, *how to teach* will not be a problem as the texts will be taught by university teachers who are skilled, trained and experienced enough and of course, aware of their roles. The problem is that teaching Shakespeare in an EFL class is *undoubtedly not a time-filling activity: it requires preparation and dedication*. As Barman and Basu (2013) mention that the problems that EFL teachers encounter may be compounded by the dearth of pedagogically-designed appropriate materials. So, *lack of effective language learning activities* is a major problem and the teacher needs to play the vital role in this regard. In this regard, I would like to mention the statement of Bracaj(2014) who says, “provision of materials does not only mean choosing materials and making a suitable number of copies for the class; the teacher’s task also includes adapting materials when published materials are unsuitable or writing his/her own materials” (p. 46). In fact, it is the teachers who lie at the heart of the successful implementation of this course. As Somak (2003; cited by Porcaro, 2013; p. 33) states: “We must acknowledge the fact that much of the language that our students need will not be found in any course books or pre-packaged materials; therefore, we must be willing and able to prepare our own”.

1.4.3. Some Activities for Classroom Practices

“Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach him to use the Net and he won’t bother you for weeks” Anonymous (cited in Teeler & Gray, 2006; p. 36). I think this single statement is sufficient enough to make us understand the effectiveness of *Internet* now-a-days. Internet- the *road of the information superhighway*, has been typed as “the most significant development in communication tools since the invention of the printing press and then condemned as the end of civilisation as we know it” (Teeler & Gray, 2006; p. 1). And if so, how is it being used by language teachers? Teeler and Gray (2006) also answered the question in the following way:

According to teachers’ comments- at conferences, in papers and on the Internet mailing lists dedicated to ELT- they seem to use it for just about everything: developments, updating language skills, finding materials, learning about computer applications, keeping in touch with friends and colleagues, teaching, working on class projects and activities, and just having fun (p.5).

There are endless journals, newsletters, articles, write-ups, research works, lesson plans, projects and activities about Shakespeare and his work available on the internet. There are different materials on Shakespeare available on internet for adapting and using in the classroom. The EFL teacher’s task is- searching the Internet by using browsers, directories and different search engines for materials and adapting and using them according to the requirement of his class. However, teachers need to be aware of two important things: copyright laws and authenticity of the materials and I think, for the university teachers it won’t be a problem at all. So, from the above discussion it is clear that *lack of effective materials* for language learning activities will not be a problem for exploiting Shakespeare in EFL class at tertiary level.

Here, I would like to share some strategies that I have adapted from the following Internet sources, considering the legality of downloading and reusing the materials: Belschner, (2006-07); Shakespeare’s Language, RSC (Royal Shakespeare Company); Cetti Cina (2013);



eNotes. com, Inc.(2013); Paris (2007); Mate (2005) [proper citation including e-mail address, domain name, URL, title etc. have been included in the References]

- i) At first, we have to select a play that motivates and excites the teacher;
- ii) Then, the teacher should use a good edition of the play, with footnotes and read the summary of the action if necessary;
- iii) But, don't substitute the summary for Shakespeare, because it is *how* he writes it that makes his works exciting intellectually and aesthetically;
- iv) After that, the teacher will tell the story to the students briefly. Emphasize the story. The story should always be the focal point of lesson. The language is obviously the key to unlocking the story but it should not be used as the entry point;
- v) Then, teacher should try to attract the attention of the students, even he/she can exploit the storylines before they realize they are studying Shakespeare then see their amazement when they realize that they are studying Shakespeare;
- vi) **Split it up:** Instead of reading the full text just pick out the main scene or a dialogue or even a Soliloquy.
- vii) **Make it Fun and Interactive:** after that the following techniques may be shared and discussed by unlocking the Most Common Difficulties mentioned above slowly and skillfully simply by :

Replacing / Rendering/ Rewriting:

Archaic Words

"*thou*", "*thee*" and "*ye*"—these three words were all forms of the one word we use today: "*YOU*".

Many other archaic forms of words, simple one-syllable words can be replaced without the slightest difference to the scansion:

"sith"-----since	"writ"-----wrote
"wrek"-----wreck	"brake"----broke
"holp"-----helped	"spake"---- spoke
"bare"----- bore	

Syntax

Unusual word order in a sentence is called *inversion*. Shakespeare used inversion to create specific dramatic and poetic effects.

Strategy-1

Let's take a look at a great example from Robinson's *Unlocking Shakespeare's language*

I ate the sandwich.

I the sandwich ate.

Ate the sandwich I.

Ate I the sandwich.

The sandwich I ate.

The sandwich ate I.

Robinson shows us these four words can create six unique sentences which carry the same meaning. While reading Shakespeare we will find this type of unusual word arrangement.

Use it as a Fun in the class.

Activity



Divide the class into groups and assign two or three of this type of sentences to each group. Tell them to identify the (*Subject, Verb and Object*) and tell them to re-write or re-order the sentences as modern sentence pattern- *Subject (S) + Verb (V) + Object (O)*

e.g. “*Where is thy husband now?*” “*Where be thy brothers?*”

Nothing is lost by rendering this as we should today:

Where is your husband now? Where are your brothers?

Strategy-2

While reading longer speeches, keep track the Subject, Verb and Object-

“The king hath happily received, Macbeth,

The news of thy success: and when he reads

Thy personal venture in the rebel’s fight.....”(Macbeth I,iii)

1st clause: The king hath happily received Macbeth,/The news of thy success:

Subject: The king

Verb: has received

Object: the news [of Macbeth’s success]

2nd clause: and when he reads/thy personal venture in the rebel’s fight,

Subject: he [the king]

Verb: reads

Object: [about] your venture

Strategy-3

In tracking the line of action in a passage, it is useful to identify the main thoughts that are being expressed. Divide the class into groups, and assign a Soliloquy or an exciting Dialogue for each group, tell them to read it aloud and identify the thoughts that are expressed in those lines. After that help them understanding the thoughts by paraphrasing:

e.g. In the following lines in which Hamlet expresses his feelings about the death of his father and the remarriage of his mother:

“*O God! a beast that wants discourse o reason*

Would have mourn’d longer-married with my uncle,

My father’s brother, but no more like my father

Than I to Hercules” (Hamlet I,ii)

However, the study of literature in a language class, though being mainly associated with reading and writing, can play an equally meaningful role in teaching both *speaking and listening*.

Strategy-4

Select a scene (a shorter one) from one of his tragedies or comedies, use it for watching in the classroom, and then practice some activities like *Gap-filling*. The purpose in one hand *is to promote the appreciation of comic or tragic scenes and on the other hand, to develop listening skill*.

Here is an example from Mate (2005; pp. 69-70):

“*Where is Polonius?- Gap Filling*

This exercise is built on watching a shorter scene from *Hamlet* by Laurence Olivier. Students are first asked to watch the scene and make notes to be able to summarise what they were talking about. After screening and a brief summary by students, the conversation is handed out to them with certain expressions and phrases deleted. The task is to fill the missing words:

King: Now, Hamlet, where’s Polonius?

Ham: At supper.

King: At supper! where?



Ham: Not where he eats, but where he is eaten: a certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet: we fat all creatures else to fat us and we fat ourselves for worms: your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service,-- two dishes, but to one table: that's the end.

King: Alas, alas!

Ham: A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.

King: What dost thou mean by this?

Ham: Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar.

King: Where's Polonius?

Ham: In heaven: send thither to see: if your messenger find him not there, seek him i' the other place yourself. But, indeed, if you find him not within this month, you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby.

King: Go seek him there. [To some Attendants.]

Ham: He will stay till you come."

The scene is somewhat longer than one minute. After the task sheet has completed, checked and understood on this comic scene in a tragedy. In this way, oral reading, dramatization, pantomiming, reenactment, discussion, and group activities can be conducted for teaching speaking and listening skills".

2. Conclusion

However, as Yen claims: "a Shakespeare teacher may ask, what is the purpose of studying Shakespeare at university in an EFL country? He answers, it is for language's sake first, then for the literary knowledge's sake" (p. 33). My answer is also the same like Yen. Still, one may find it as an ambitious idea to read Shakespeare in EFL classroom. But, only a careful preparation, selection as well as dedication of the teacher is the only requirement to exploit Shakespeare's work in an EFL class. The teacher's role is also to organize the class, to be aware of the class objectives, to have a good understanding of the course content, as well as to be flexible and willing to cooperate with learners and have at least, some interest in the texts of Shakespeare. On the other hand, the result is rewarding both for the teachers and students. The sense of achievement of introducing Shakespeare to an EFL classroom will be huge.

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