Teaching Shakespeare to Young ESL Learners in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Teaching Shakespeare to young ESL learners can be one of the most challenging tasks for English teachers and parents. Because of the difficult vocabulary and unusual language, Shakespeare is often left unread and unexplored both in school and at home. With a view to helping children overcome reading obstacles and learn to appreciate Shakespeare and his plays, the Hong Kong Public Libraries and I co-hosted a weekly Shakespeare teens' reading club for K12 learners from local grammar schools. Four Shakespearean plays were introduced to about twenty Cantonese child participants who had no or little experience reading or studying Shakespeare's works. To enhance imagination and interactions among child readers, various learner-centred, interactive, and multimedia pedagogical activities such as the reader's theatre, movie screenings, creative writing tasks, comics reading and drawing, etc. were used in the reading club. In this paper, I will share teaching ideas and reading activities that make Shakespeare understandable and enjoyable for ESL young readers.

Keywords: Shakespeare, lifelong learning, lifewide learning, multimedia pedagogy, reading club activities

Introduction

Four hundred years since his death, Shakespeare is still read, studied, performed and translated more than any other writer in the world. His works transcend time – not only do they show English in its most glorious form, but they also mirror contemporary issues we face today, such as love, fate, death, conflict, betrayal, temptation, and morality. Most teachers and parents would agree that young learners should at least have some basic knowledge of Shakespeare so that they would not find themselves ignorant of the cultural icons, feeling isolated from society. However, because of the difficult vocabulary and unusual language, teaching Shakespeare is not easy. Some English teachers make their students read Shakespeare's original plays in class and design compulsory homework for their English class; some overzealous parents in Asia even force their children to memorize and recite famous quotes of his in English. But rote-learning, drilling, and tedious reading exercises may daunt young learners. Learners should choose for themselves what they want to read and learn. As Gardner (2008) puts it, 'You can't force kids to love Shakespeare.'

One way of making Shakespeare palatable to young learners of different learning abilities is to bring down the 'high art' (Frossard, 2012:1) of Shakespeare to the level of popular culture. To do so, first and foremost, one should not insist on teaching Shakespeare's works the way they were originally written and performed. Rather, one can consider using the multimedia pedagogical approach. According to Gilakjani (2012:58), the rationale and pedagogical values for using multimedia in class are as follows:

- *To raise interest level* – students appreciate (and often expect) a variety of media.
- *To enhance understanding* – rich media materials boost student comprehension for complex topics, especially dynamic processes that unfold over time.
- *To increase memorability* – rich media materials lead to better encoding and easy retrieval.

To help the class over the difficult language of Shakespeare, teachers can start by introducing non-traditional texts such as cartoons, comics, movies, animations, abridged versions, and even digital games to motivate young learners. As Frossard (2012:16-17) remarks:

When students leave the classroom, they should leave with positive experiences —whether related to the language of Shakespeare, the context of Shakespeare, or something else entirely — that will push them to pursue a career of life-long learning. Through the use of non-traditional texts, such as graphic novels, teachers can resolve the challenges of teaching Shakespeare in their own class. Whether students struggle with engaging in the text, the difficult language, lack of time, or a learning disability, it is possible to teach…Shakespeare in an exciting and meaningful way.

Moreover, one can consider teaching Shakespeare beyond the classroom. Instead of forcing learners to study the literary texts in the school setting, one can use Shakespeare as material for life-wide learning, where experiential learning can take place in real contexts and authentic settings. It is also important for the teacher to encourage life-long learning, which goes far beyond in-class tests and public examinations in the formal education setting. It should stimulate learners' interest, invoke their prior learning experience, leave room for imagination, and encourage discussions that will be useful and meaning in the rest of their lives.

Figure 1. Concepts of lifelong and lifewide learning (Jackson, 2014)
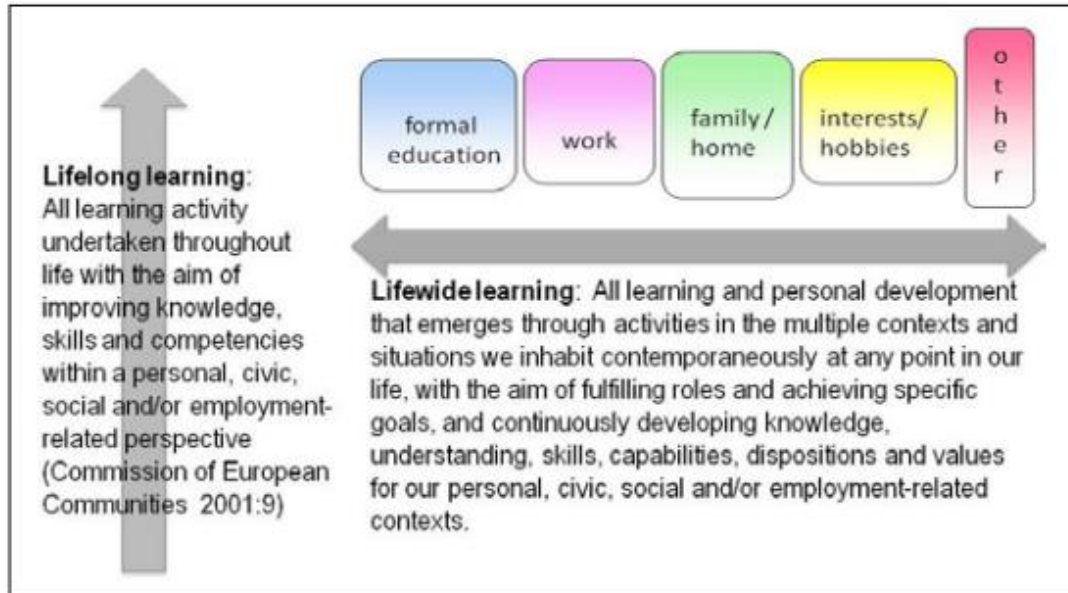
In this paper, I will share my experience of introducing Shakespeare to a group of child learners in the English teens' reading club in Hong Kong. I will illustrate how Shakespearean drama can be used to arouse the reading interest of child learners. Then, I will also discuss how the reading club activities can also promote life-wide learning skills such as art appreciation, creativity, and critical thinking. In the following, I will first provide some background information regarding the English teens' reading club and its club members.

Background of Hong Kong Public Libraries' English Teens' Reading Club

The English teens' reading club, organized annually by the Hong Kong Public Libraries (HKPL), is a learning platform for Hong Kong children and youth to share their love of reading and learn English language through reading. At the moment, only seven major public libraries in Hong Kong will hold the English teens' reading club, which is usually held in spring each year. Registered club members will meet weekly for one and a half hours during weekends. Participants who have an attendance rate of seventy-five per cent or above will be awarded a certificate.

In March 2013, I was invited by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department of the Hong Kong Government to conduct the English teens' reading club at the Kowloon Public Library. Regular meetings were held on four Sunday afternoons (from 2:30 pm to 4 pm). There were altogether twenty participants. Most of them were primary school students aged nine to twelve. The participants' mother tongue is Cantonese, and English their second language. From the questionnaires collected before the reading club sessions began, I noticed that almost all of the twenty local Cantonese participants of the reading club came from traditional English grammar schools in Hong Kong, where all subjects, except the Chinese language, were taught in English. Having started learning English language since kindergarten (at about three years old), most participants were competent users of English. Most of them had no problem reading simple English children's books and they were able to express themselves in simple English, both spoken and written. However, from my observation, English learning, to them, was not always enjoyable because the English curriculum in school was filled with a great deal of homework, dictations, grammar

tests, and exam-oriented drilling exercises. On the other hand, after school, many of them were sent to tuition classes arranged by their parents. As a number of participants revealed, during their leisure time, they preferred reading Chinese books, newspapers and magazines to English ones.

Despite the strenuous English drilling in school and tuition classes, among these twenty participants, only a few said they had exposure to Shakespeare and his plays before coming to the reading club. Very few of them can name any of Shakespeare's plays apart from *Romeo and Juliet*. To my surprise, when I told them the Chinese titles of Shakespeare's plays, many realized that the selected texts were actually not totally new to them. So to speak, the English learning environment beyond classroom may not be as supportive as the Hong Kong parents and teachers believe it to be. English reading, to most children in the city, is largely related to school work, assessment and exams. If we want to encourage a lifelong English reading habit from their childhood, it is not sufficient to only teach them English grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation in class. We need to arouse child learners' reading interest and build a creative learning environment that involves integrated skills outside the classroom and beyond language alone.

Text Selection

One problem in teaching Shakespeare to ESL young learners is that of remoteness. According to Parkinson and Thomas (2000:11), '[t]exts can be remote from learners in all sorts of ways – historically, geographically, socially and in terms of life experience'. With regards to the young learners' limited exposure to Shakespeare as well as the time constraints of the reading club, I selected some non-traditional texts, such as comics, cartoons, movies and quick text versions to introduce Shakespeare to the reading club members. Four Shakespeare's best-known plays were chosen, each for one Sunday session:

1. *Twelfth Night*
2. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
3. *Romeo and Juliet*
4. *Macbeth*

For *Twelfth Night*, we used Appignanesi's *Manga Shakespeare* (2010), which provides straightforward visual experience to young learners. Since children nowadays are familiar with the visual media, using texts of different media modes can engage child learners in learning Shakespeare immediately and automatically. What is also good about the *Manga Shakespeare* series is that besides the comic illustrations, original Shakespeare text is excerpted. For example, an excerpted monologue by Viola, the female protagonist of *Twelfth Night*, can be found in Appignanesi's manga version (2010: 68-69): 'My master loves her dearly, and I, poor monster, fond as much on him, and she, mistaken, seems to dote on me. What will become of this? O time, thou must untangle this, not I! It is too hard a knot for me to untie.' From my experience, such a combination of comics and texts can easily get young learners involved in reading the actual text of Shakespeare.

For *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I used *Shakespeare: The Animated Tales* (1992). The fun and colourful cartoon can visualize Shakespeare's characters and enhance learners' English listening skills. With the shortened play in plain text, child participants of the reading club were able to follow the story even though they had little to no experience in reading Shakespeare.

In the third reading session, we discussed *Romeo and Juliet* by using Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996), the modern film version starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes. This modern-day adaptation of Shakespeare's best-known play not only allows young learners to gain a better control over what is going on in the plot, but also bridges the gap between the original verse in *Romeo and Juliet* and the real life, helping the ESL learners feel more at ease with Shakespearean rhetoric as they further their studies later on.

As young learners had earned much positive and powerful learning experience from our reading club, in the final club meeting, I used *Macbeth the graphic novel: quick text version* (2008). In the book, original ideas of the play are covered but shortened and simplified for quick reading. The abridged English version is suitable for both silent reading and reading aloud. In the reading club, children were instructed to highlight and recite powerful lines with emotions after they listened to the quick text. With the recitation

practice, the participants became more alert to repetition patterns and the variety of sentence lengths and structures in Shakespeare's dialogues and monologues.

Activating Background Information on Shakespeare
After selecting interesting texts for the reading club, I tried various teaching and learning methods to motivate the young learners. I found that to arouse children's interest, first, the teacher needs to help them activate their general knowledge in the content area. Providing learners an introduction to Shakespeare's life and works is crucial, which can contextualize the reading. When I introduced the background information about Shakespeare, I did not rely solely on plain texts. Instead, I showed the young learners Shakespeare's portrait, Shakespeare's family tree, a map and a set of photos illustrating Stratford-upon-Avon (Shakespeare's hometown), photos of his birthplace, a timeline of Shakespeare's life and works, as well as photos and a video walking tour guide of the Globe Theatre in London.

Motivating Learners
To further encourage active learning, the teacher should also help learners see the point of reading, realize how the reading is related to them as individuals, and learn how to develop new and creative ways of looking at things. Learning can become effective if the teacher can instill knowledge through the four kinds of knowing (Heron and Reason, 2001:183) below:

1. *Propositional Knowing*, the knowing of facts through ideas and theories. This kind of knowing is also the commonest kind that occurs in traditional learning processes.
2. *Experiential knowing*, the knowing that takes place through the transformation of experience. As Cantor (1997: 81) states, experiential knowing can be achieved as students make connections in the process of learning and increase their compassion and empathy.
3. *Presentational Knowing*, the knowing that encompasses intuition and reflection, imagination and conceptual thinking (Heron, 1992: 158). It reflects the ability to verbalize explicit knowledge and represent tacit knowledge. The form of expression may not be limited to linguistic articulation though. Other 'expressive forms of aesthetics, such as drama, movement, story and dance' (Murphy, 2001: 10) can also be included.
4. *Practical Knowing*, or 'knowing 'how to' do something', can be 'expressed in a skill, knack or competence' (Heron and Reason, 2001: 183). It shows the learners' ability to apply what they have learnt to accomplish something. Through practical knowing, one puts something into action and finds out how to do things better.

Noticeably, while propositional knowing can occur in the traditional classroom settings, the other three kinds of knowing extend beyond the classroom and are best manifested in life-wide learning settings such as the teens' reading club. In the following, I will focus on how experiential knowing, presentational knowing and practical knowing can be achieved through various pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities in the Shakespeare reading club organized by the public library.

Enhancing Experiential Knowing through Pre-reading Activities
Experiential knowing, as Reason and Bradbury (2007: 369) define, 'is feeling engaged with what there is, participating, through the perceptual process, in the shared presence of mutual encounter'. In the reading club, experiential knowing started with the pre-reading activities. Before I introduced Shakespeare's plays, I first stimulated the child participants' mind with open-ended questions that directed them to the main topics in the play. For example, because a large part of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is about love, dreams, fairies and magic, I encouraged conversations by putting young learners into small groups and asking them to share with one another their views on:

- 'love at first sight';
- whether they think there could be a world of spirits and fairies that affect our daily lives;
- whether they believe that strange things would happen on some special days of the year, and
- whether they remember the dreams they had the previous night.

As participants expressed themselves freely on such familiar topics, they were also given the opportunity to share their personal experiences with authentic feelings.

Similarly, before I introduced *Macbeth* to the child learners, I set pre-reading tasks to help students engage in and experience the main themes of the play. First, the young learners were invited to share with one another scenarios which they might have come across – they were asked to share whether they had experience getting away with doing something wrong, whether they felt lucky or guilty.

When all participants of the reading club had finished sharing their thoughts, I showed images from the play of *Macbeth* to visualize the story and main characters. I then invited participants to describe everything that they noticed about the images, which in turn supported comprehension for learners whose linguistic comprehension was not native-like. Through happy sharing, the child learners were also given a chance to construct descriptive points, verbalize and elaborate their ideas, as well as develop their skills in using relevant vocabulary.

However, if the lesson/session does not allow sufficient time for the teacher to organize pre-reading activities for the learners, the teacher can prepare a brief story map, a character tree, or simply a one-line plot summary that catches learners' attention, arousing their curiosity: e.g. Boy meets girl. Boy marries girl. Boy and girl commit suicide (*Romeo and Juliet*).

Encouraging Presentational Knowing through While-reading Activities

Grounded on experiential knowing, presentational knowing, as Reason and Bradbury (2007:371) state, can occur 'non-discursively through visual arts, music, dance and movement, and discursively in poetry, drama, and the continuously creative capacity of the human individual and social mind to tell stories'. In the reading club, presentational knowing was achieved through drawing, role-play, and the reader's theatre.

In every reading session, I would allow child learners to watch the cartoon or movie adaptation of Shakespeare's play, especially the first act. They were also given silent reading time to read just the first few pages of *Manga Shakespeare* or the abridged play. Then, when the child learners came to know more about the beginning scenes, I encouraged them to summarize what they knew about the story and predict what they believed would happen as the story continued. After the child learners had captured some good ideas, they were invited to express their ideas by writing a short conversation between the main characters and recite the lines in a role-play. For instance, in the session on *Romeo and Juliet*, children were instructed to create a conversation between Juliet and Mrs. Capulet, her mother, who tells Juliet that she must marry Paris. As for learners who preferred presenting their ideas through non-discursive means, I encouraged them to draw four-box comics of what they thought would happen in the tomb scene.

Besides role-play and comics drawing, I also encouraged presentational knowing and art appreciation through the reader's theatre. Fun scenes from *Twelfth Night* were excerpted and simplified, and child learners, each assigned with a role, were taught to recite the character's lines with meaning. Through the reader's theatre, participants brought Shakespeare's characters to life. When the child recited Viola's lines, she used a feminine voice; when Viola cross-dresses as Cesario and talks with Countess Olivia, the same child used a man's voice, and all participants laughed and enjoyed the recitation. Meanwhile, notions of English word stress, intonation, linking, even pauses, were also introduced to the child learners.

Promoting Practical Knowing through Post-reading Activities

Last but not least, to achieve practical knowing, the English teacher can help learners make connections between Shakespeare's works and their everyday experiences. For instance, before each reading club session ended, I selected one part of the play that most reading club members found particularly meaningful. Then, I encouraged everyone to write a short piece of creative writing to consolidate their conceptual understanding. For the session on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, child learners were invited to invent a magic potion. In the post-reading task, learners were instructed to describe the function of the potion, together with its colour, smell, and other characteristics. To make the writing process even more interesting, I also asked the participants to write a recipe of the magic potion they invented.

As for the session on *Romeo and Juliet*, I asked the young readers to write letters. One-third of the participants were told they were Romeo and they were asked to write a love letter to Juliet. Another one-third of the class pretended that they were Juliet and wrote a love letter back to Romeo. As for the rest of the child participants, their writing task was to write an Agony Aunt advice letter to Romeo or Juliet.

As the child learners worked on their writing tasks, they naturally put themselves in the shoes of Shakespeare's characters; at the same time, they improved their English language and critical thinking skills. When all participants finished their writing task, I displayed all their letters on the board, gave everyone some time to read over all the writing, and asked participants to leave comments, including comments that suggested how the writer could improve his/her writing. Finally, the participants were invited to vote for the letter they liked most. Through the creative writing and peer-assessment process, child learners were encouraged to relate personal memories with the plays and look deeply into everyday experiences, making learning meaningful and enjoyable.

Besides creative writing, the teacher may also consider wrapping up the reading club session with deep reflection, true-to-life games such as hot-seating. For example, after sharing the story of *Macbeth*, I wanted the reading club members to express their views freely. I then asked one child participant to pretend that she was Lady Macbeth. Sitting around her, the rest of the learners took turns asking Lady Macbeth questions, such as: 'King Duncan trusted you and your husband so much. How could you kill him?' or 'How did you feel when King Duncan died? Did you really feel happy?' Through the hot-seating game, learners felt even more deeply for the characters and they understood the main themes of the play better. As Flachmann (1997: 61) notes, Shakespeare's characters live in us, so 'all we have to do to understand them is find the very "human" objectives which motivates their actions and mark their kinship with us as vivid, unique individuals in this world'. To arouse children's reading interest, it may be more important to spark curiosity and encourage involvement than to focus on thematic abstraction and symbolic representation, especially at the initial stage.

Conclusion

English teachers often find Shakespeare difficult to teach because it is hard to make students see the fun of reading the difficult language in the original plays. One way of helping young ESL learners is to teach Shakespeare through manga, cartoons, films and abridgement versions beyond traditional settings and approaches. The multimedia pedagogy can provide 'a complex multi-sensory experience in exploring our world through the presentation of information through text, graphics, images, audio and video' (Gilakjani, 2012:57). Compared to using only one single medium, the multimedia pedagogical design presents 'more information at once' (ibid), encourage 'active processing' (*ibid.*), and allows learners to use 'more than one representation to improve memory' (*ibid.*). My teaching experience in the teens' reading club has shown evidence that multi-visual media and various fun but non-traditional reading activities can elicit enthusiasm and intelligent responses from child learners, including those whose first language is not English, and those who may not have learnt about Shakespeare previously.

Besides, affective dispositions, creativity, cultural literacy, and art appreciation can also be enhanced among child learners as they shared their viewpoints and interpretations of Shakespeare's plays and characters. As my teaching experience in the reading club reflected, Shakespearean plays, when used effectively, can be good materials for lifelong and lifewide learning.

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