

Using Shakespeare to teach English in the digital age

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This paper examines the opportunities and challenges of using Shakespeare as a teaching resource for English language learners, using as a case study an open distance learning programme aimed at engaging EFL students across diverse world contexts. The paper reviews the pedagogical design, production and dissemination of these teaching materials and in doing so discusses how points of language, issues of historical culture, and insights into modern usage can all be addressed in ways which aim to be both entertaining and instructional by reference to Shakespeare's life and works. Additionally, it considers how the harnessing of the transmedia affordances of digital communication can create a broad, interactive experience for students, thus mixing the traditional with the cutting-edge in English language pedagogy.

Introduction: Il faut que j'apprenne a parler

There is one example of what might pass as an EFL lesson in Shakespeare's plays. It comes in Act 3, Scene 4 of *Henry V*, when Princess Catherine learns a few beginner level vocabulary items from her lady-in-waiting Alice, in preparation for meeting the king, to whom she is betrothed.

CATHERINE	Je te prie, m'enseignez. Il faut que j'apprenne a parler. Comment appelez-vous la main en anglais?
ALICE	La main? Elle est appelée <i>de hand</i> .

(3.4.5-6)

Both the format and content of the lesson follow the genre of teaching manuals that were popular at the time (Simonini, 1951); John Florio's *Firste Fruites* (1578) is a famous example. These were composed of invented conversations designed to contain a check-list of vocabulary around a single topic (e.g. parts of the body), which would give the enthusiastic learner the basic lexical resources to deal with a given scenario. This approach is not perhaps the most engaging form of language teaching, even if it might still be recognisable to students in certain contexts around the world. In the context of the play, of course, the nature of the pedagogy is not of any great importance: the scene is designed to highlight the cultural differences between two opposing nations, and the attempts to bridge these – linguistically in the first place, then via the institution of marriage.¹

Moving to the flipside of the equation, Shakespeare has, in the past, been a staple in the history of teaching English. David Crystal (2004: 147) writes that 'In earlier centuries [Shakespeare] was one of the reason that people wanted to learn English in the first place, and many people did learn their English purely by reading his texts'. In the years around the two recent centenary celebrations of his birth and death there has been a renewed interest in using him in the ELT classroom (e.g. Eisenmann and Lütge 2014; Lima 2014) There are many reasons behind his use in this context: his status as literary icon, the familiarity of many of the phrases and conceits from his work offer an immediate form of motivation for students; while the themes his work deals with allow for the exploration of cultural and critical thinking scenarios; and then there's the language itself, and the influence it has on modern-day English.

This paper examines the opportunities and challenges of using Shakespeare in a particular context: an open distance learning programme aimed at engaging EFL students across diverse world contexts. The case study used for this purpose consists of a series of twenty short animations aimed at young adult learners of English, and presents a means of engaging with the subject which is becoming increasingly common in the modern education environment. In order to discuss the ways in which a focus on Shakespeare and his works can produce innovative computer-based teaching, the paper reviews the design, production and dissemination of these materials, and in doing so illustrates how points of language, issues of historical culture, and insights into modern usage can all be addressed in a single product. The paper also considers how the harnessing of the transmedia affordances of digital communication (i.e. the use of an integrated use of different platforms) can create a broad, interactive experience for students, thus mixing the traditional with the cutting-edge in English language pedagogy.

Freely-disseminated Online Educational Resources

Online communications and the affordances they allow have had a significant impact on pedagogy in recent years, offering teachers new opportunities and means for engaging students, and for transcending geographical limitations. Initiatives such as Open Educational Resources (OERs) – defined by UNESCO (2002) as 'open provision of educational resources, enabled by information and communication technologies, for consultation, use and adaptation by a community of users for non-commercial purposes' have, in the words of Martin Weller 'had a positive impact for learners... [producing] a thriving global community [and] a resonance with the social function of education, all wrapped up in a modern, 21st century, digital approach' (2014: 87). Other freely-disseminated online educational resources, such as the one discussed in this paper (which shares with OERs all the principles listed in the UNESCO definition except for the right to remix and redistribute), are having a similar disruptive effect on pedagogy, and offering students new and engaging

learning opportunities.

For English language learning, which has always had a prosperous independent-study sector, there has, to date, been a relative lack of studies or research on OERs (Altunay 2013) and similar programmes, and the way they are impacting the sector. As Altunay suggests, however, their benefits can be wide ranging. These include a commitment to equal opportunity for learners, especially in contexts where people have limited access to teaching resources. They provide an environment where students can receive authentic language input, they can include forms of interactive engagement via social media, and can also enhance learner autonomy. Additionally they can be used both by independent learners as well as being incorporated into lessons by teachers, thus providing a great deal of flexibility as teaching resources.

'Shakespeare Speaks': overview, aims and approach

While the possible advantages of free-to-access online educational resources touched upon above are many, the challenge in producing a programme specifically based around Shakespeare for an ELT community was how to harness the cultural celebrity of Shakespeare in a way which would teach a variety of language points that were not only relevant and appropriate for a modern global audience, but were also historically accurate to the source. All this was to be done in a distance learning environment, and for a community of students across the world. These challenges relate both to the use of the subject itself for ELT purposes, and to the ways in which digital media can best be used for language teaching at a distance. In this section we will look at strategies for addressing these challenges, after an initial brief outline of the programme we are using as a case study.

'Shakespeare Speaks' is a series of short pedagogic animations aimed at adult learners of English at approximately B1 level (in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) and above.² The episodes are centred around popular everyday English phrases and expressions which were coined or popularised by Shakespeare and are still very much in use today. Examples include 'a tower of strength' (*Richard III, Act 5, Scene 3*); 'dead as a doornail' (*Henry VI Part 2, Act 4, Scene 10*); 'all that glitters is not gold' (*The Merchant of Venice, Act 2, Scene 7*). Each episode includes an authentic fragment of the actual language of Shakespeare's plays in which one of these idioms or phrases is used. These are explained and illustrated by means of short narratives inspired by incidents from Shakespeare's life and works, with a narrator providing context for the stories and talking through key language points – the purpose being that in this way brief summaries of the plots of the plays and their key characters are also introduced. Finally the phrases are illustrated with clips from modern English, which demonstrate how they are used today, thus giving students some authentic language input. Where necessary, clarification of any differences between Shakespearean

and modern usage is also provided, and synonyms and exceptions are highlighted. These various elements were all targeted to improve learners' knowledge in various key areas, as will be explained below.

The twenty animations which make up the core of the project are also supplemented by a range of additional materials including comprehension exercises (checking and providing understanding of the narrative), language exploration and practice activities (for the core phrase and extension vocabulary), definitions of key vocabulary items, audio modelling of key language and opportunities for users to submit their productive work for publication on the Shakespeare Speaks website, as well as various games and quizzes disseminated via social media (see Figure 1).

<Figure 1: Quiz for 'a pound of flesh'>

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This structure for the design of the project (as outlined above) was a product of its multiple aims, and in reviewing these we hope to be able to highlight some of the key issues involved in teaching English through canonical literature in an online distance environment. Lima notes that one of the 'most common preconceptions among students and teachers alike is that Shakespeare's language is difficult because it is outdated' (2014: 194). This is a preconception that clearly needs to be challenged at the outset of any teaching based around his writings. As Crystal points out, the difference between Early Modern English and Modern English is far less marked than one might suppose, and that '[o]nly 5 per cent of the time are you going to encounter a word [in Shakespeare] which is different in form or meaning from what exists today' (2004: 149). In order to counter such presuppositions, we thus used a strategy of introducing examples of Shakespearean language both in its original context (albeit presented in an accessible and light-hearted way), and of modern usage, as a means of illustrating just how contemporary much of the language is. To this end, the starting point for the language learning content was a focus on memorable and useful phrases that are in popular use today but have their origins in or popularity due to Shakespeare. Within this context, idioms emerged as a fruitful focal point.

Shakespearean idioms and everyday phrases

Idioms are particularly appealing as a means of making Shakespeare's work accessible because of their prevalence in his work. Crystal estimates that there are over a hundred idioms and semi-proverbial expressions that are still in use today which derive from the poems and plays, and that people are generally unaware of their provenance, so completely integrated into the language have they become (Crystal 2004). For example, if you think that ELT and Shakespearean verse are *strange bedfellows*, that his plays are *all Greek*

to you and that you'd just get *in a pickle* trying to learn English this way, you are immediately proving Crystal's point (and indirectly quoting *The Tempest* [Act 2, Scene 2], *Julius Caesar* [Act 1, Scene 2] and then *The Tempest* [Act 5, Scene 1] again). In addition to illustrating the ways in which Shakespeare was a creative inventor of language, idioms also have the advantage of being conversationally useful, as well as being attractive to students because of the sense of authenticity they feel they lend their English.

<Figure 2: Video and transcript for 'In a pickle'.>
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Modern usage and the ELT user

In order to be able to address a wider range of lexical items and thus aim at maximising student interest and vocabulary expansion, the series did not limit itself solely to idioms however. A decision was made that for each core Shakespearean phrase the production team would generate a set of related expressions, which could then be incorporated into the supplementary materials. In order to ensure the relevance of the idioms or expressions for the contemporary ELT user, one of the criteria was whether it was possible to source a contemporary or well-known authentic use of the phrase; if not, the phrase couldn't be held up as continuing to be popular. For example, for the expression 'I'll send him packing' (*Henry IV Part 1, Act 2, Scene 4*), various other expressions with the same meaning were presented and practised – 'get rid of someone', 'show someone the door', 'send someone on their way' – as were other ways to say 'go away' – 'get out of my sight!', 'get lost!', 'sling your hook!', 'on your bike!', 'jog on!', sourced either from thesauri or by asking expert speakers for suggestions. In doing this it was possible to create a vocabulary building exercise based on the initial example from Shakespeare.

In addition to English language teaching, the project was also designed to convey information about British historical culture at Shakespeare's time (including the life of Shakespeare) and to introduce his works. This focus on both the culture of his time as well as the language was of key importance given that the series was released at the time of the many celebrations commemorating the 400th anniversary of his death.

Engaging students

Given the amount of content on social media channels – in 2015 YouTube reported that 300 hours of video were being uploaded every minute (YouTube 2015) – having a distinctive product is very important, and a key challenge for initiatives of this sort is producing materials which balance a high-level of appeal (and thus stands out from everything else) with pedagogically useful content. The short animated video format, which is at

once both entertaining and informative, has a strong track-record of appealing to students and facilitating learning in this context (Seargeant 2017). There is evidence that audiences are engaging with ever more concise materials on the internet and, as Chambers says, 'With the average YouTube video clocking in at four minutes and users often only staying for half of that, [it is important that] content should "hook" the viewer in from the beginning' (Chambers 2015). To suit this context the choice was made to base each episode around a 3-4 minute narrative, which could achieve the multiple teaching aims outlined above. The advantage of a narrative approach is that it provides context for the learning points, facilitates the achievement of the aims (especially in terms of explaining the plots and characters of the plays), and is also immediately engaging.

Humour is often another important part of the ingredients: from the experience of creating similar assets in the past the production team knew that this was something the audience clearly appreciated, and in the case of this particular project it was also a good way to challenge the idea that teaching English and Shakespeare is a dull or dry proposition.

A further important element for the project was including the authentic samples of language in use, in the form of quotes from well-known figures, which were then voiced by the actors. The rationale here was that while the audience was likely to be interested in the Shakespearean language in and of itself, the intention was also on teaching them useful conversational English (given that the target audience was global EFL/ESL students). For example, a short quote from an interview with David Beckham was used to illustrate the phrase 'a tower of strength' (*Richard III*): 'Alex Ferguson was like a father to me. He was a tower of strength'. Here again, the global cultural recognition of a figure such as Beckham was coupled with the language learning content in order to make the teaching appealing and memorable.

Another issue that contributed to the design of the materials was that experience of producing other online distance learning materials indicated the need to provide a complete learning experience in the video itself. Learners may well not click through to supplementary practice materials, but even if they decide to watch the video alone and don't do anything else they've had the opportunity to improve their English and learn something about Shakespeare's life, times and language. For those who do want to study further, however, a simple and predictable structure is used to organise the web materials so that learners know where they are in each learning journey but at the same time there is an element of newness in each set of materials. Furthermore, the self-contained nature of each block of material makes it suitable for classroom use: teachers have, in effect, a complete *presentation – practice – production* lesson at their disposal, while the accompanying website also features a dedicated teachers' area with supplementary lesson plans should teachers wish to use them.

Specific considerations for using Shakespeare in ELT

As noted above, Shakespearean language is often thought to be very different from modern English, and while the actual difference is less marked than people suppose, given the audience it was important nevertheless to ensure that teaching concentrated on language points which would be of direct use to modern speakers of the language. For this reason phrases were picked that are still in modern usage and that are applicable to a range of different situations rather than having their own self-contained meaning. For example, a phrase such as 'Wherefore art thou Romeo?' was not included because, although well-known, it is not used in a wider, everyday context. Similarly, some phrases appeared in very long or heavily contextualised passages in the original Shakespearean texts, so careful attention was needed when extracting a meaningful snippet that would be appropriate for the target audience. This was another key point of the design, given the ELT aims of the project generally.

Another pedagogical consideration which went into the design was to make it clear when the form, wording, meaning or use of the phrase had changed over time. For example, the narrator in the episode 'The world's mine oyster' (*The Merry Wives of Windsor, Act 2, Scene 2*) explains that:

In Shakespeare's play, the phrase *the world's mine oyster* was used as a threat - but today, it has become *the world's my oyster* - or *your oyster* - and it describes situations that contain wonderful opportunities.

An example from Chris Gardner, author of *The Pursuit of Happyness*, was then given to illustrate this: 'The world is your oyster. It's up to you to find the pearls'.

This use of a contemporary authentic use of the phrase in every episode was an important element of the approach. For some episodes, however, it proved difficult to source an appropriately learner-friendly quote and to provide the necessary supporting explanation for this quote. In this respect, we were careful to shape the content to our imagined student audience, based on experience of their needs and likely contextual knowledge. The example below, from the episode on 'A fool's paradise' (*Romeo and Juliet, Act 2, Scene 4*) was one of the most difficult in this respect. Again, this is the narrator's explanation:

These days, the phrase *a fool's paradise* describes any situation that somebody thinks is good, without realising that it won't last - or that it's actually bad. Take this 2015 BBC News headline, written when the value of the single European

currency fell to record lows – making it cheap to buy for investors, but not particularly safe: ‘The euro: Good bet or a fool's paradise?’

In addition to the authentic quote, a second example was also added, scripted by the team itself, which allowed for better control over the level of language. In this way it was possible to provide a very clear model example of the phrase in modern use, while also fulfilling the other various aims of the episode: ‘Jack's work is terrible. He's living in a fool's paradise if he thinks he's getting a pay rise’.

Issues such as those above can apply to classroom teaching of Shakespeare in ELT as much as to online distance teaching. As mentioned above however, one of the advantages of freely-disseminated online resources is that they have a global reach, and can be accessed by anyone with internet access around the world. But having such a broad potential audience means that consideration needs to be taken about the expectations and sensitivities of this very wide audience. In order to make the series as accessible as possible to this audience the authentic quotes that illustrate modern usage were drawn from people with an international profile such as David Beckham, Kristen Stewart and Thierry Henry. When introducing these quotes, an explanation was also added that would gloss the identity of the person providing other contextual information.

An advantage of having Shakespeare as the focal point is, of course, his international appeal, but it also associates the language very specifically with British historical culture (despite ideas that Shakespeare is in a sense himself a global icon). As such, although not specifically promoting a British standard (Early Modern English is, after all, not what is spoken in modern-day Britain), the language is implicitly presented within an EFL context rather than an EIL or World Englishes context. To an extent the fact that this particular project has been made and broadcast under the BBC brand means that it attracts an audience who expect and are interested in, or at least tolerate, a British perspective. As part of the World Service, however, the production department also has an outward-looking identity, which is reflected to an extent in the type of examples of modern usage which were chosen. The context in which the resource is created and presented therefore is likely also to have an influence on the cultural expectations of the student audience.

Transmedia pedagogy

As indicated earlier, Shakespeare Speaks uses a wide range of media, all of which is integrated, and in doing so makes ample use of modern digital communications technology. The use of multiple platforms and formats has a number of motivations, ranging from the practical to the pedagogically

innovative. The aim for a project of this sort is to reach the widest possible audience and for this purpose, publishing on a variety of platforms in a number of formats is an advantage. For example, audio-only versions reach those for whom bandwidth is an issue; and downloadable audio and pdf transcripts allow learners to study even when they can't get online.

In addition to giving people different options, and casting the net as wide as possible, the different media offer different opportunities for engagement and teaching. With reference to storytelling, Jenkins (2007) suggests that a transmedia approach 'represents a process where integral elements... get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated... experience'. A similar transmedia process is in operation here, as the supplementary exercises are offered not simply via the website, but on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter (e.g. with short comprehension exercises, language activities and clips from the animations – see Figure 3), and on YouTube (with interviews and games with the actors from the series).

<Figure 3: Instagram post for 'What's done is done'. The accompanying text for the post read: *'GUILTY OR NOT GUILTY? We all do things we regret – we're only human! Here are some useful expressions with 'guilt' for you to enjoy and share. Which one's your favourite? [link to website] #ShakespeareSpeaks #Macbeth # LearnEnglish #vocabulary #idiom'*>

A further consideration in cases such as this is choosing the correct tool for the specific learning job. For example, when teaching exaggeration phrases (the extension language associated with 'forever and a day' from *Romeo and Juliet*, for example), audio was provided so that learners can hear and practise the intonation of exaggeration in phrases such as 'I nearly died of embarrassment', 'I'm sick to death of...' and 'These shoes are killing me!'. In this way it was possible to give the user confidence in their delivery of a range of highly usable contemporary phrases.

Geoff Hall (2016: 456) writes that 'Literature can inspire, excite and intrigue, and engagement and inspiration are desirable in education of all kinds'. In the various ways outlined above a project such as 'Shakespeare Speaks' is able to take full advantage of the affordances of modern communications technology as these can be applied to teaching, and offer a freely-accessible educational resource which give students to the opportunity to learn about Shakespeare's life, times and language, and how his linguistic legacy exists today through phrases which are still in modern usage. Certain of the issues discussed above – particularly those about the specifics of teaching Shakespeare in an ELT context – can also be applied to classroom practice. However, the influence that digital and social media are having on communications generally means that education practices are broadening to incorporate the affordances of the online world, and for these, a number of

other specific considerations outlined above need to be taken into account. In conclusion though, we would suggest that in the ever more cluttered world of online learning, is of great importance that distance ELT is conducted in a style which is both instructional and entertaining, thus adhering to the advice that Tranio gives Licentio in *The Taming of the Shrew* (1.1.39-40): 'No profit grows where is no pleasure taken. In brief, sir, study what you most affect'.

Notes

1. It also allows Shakespeare to indulge in a bit of suggestive wordplay with the resemblance the English words sound to French obscenities: 'De foot et de cown? O Seigneur Dieu! Ils sont les mots de son mauvais, corruptible, gros, et impudique, et non pour les dames d'honneur d'user' [3.4.47-49].
2. www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/english/course/shakespeare/unit-1/

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