Teaching Shakespeare to ELLs to Develop Fluency

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Abstract
At first thought, the idea of teaching Shakespeare to English Language Learners (ELLs) to improve overall English fluency might seem out of touch with students’ capabilities and needs. Why use complex materials that might at first seem daunting to teachers and students alike? This paper provides a brief discussion of some of the benefits of the National Endowment for the Humanities funded “Shakespeare in the Schools” program and how it can be scaffolded for ELLs to create an exhilarating experience that builds confidence and community and improves speaking and listening skills. It can also aid in teaching the subskills of pronunciation and vocabulary development. One of the program’s core teaching strategies, the basic activities called Text Lay-Ups that uses the Feeding In technique, is a whole-body activity that allows ELLs to begin speaking lines of text using native speakers as language models. The following paper explores this technique’s usefulness and application for other activities in the classroom.

Introduction
There is a great variety of activities available today for ESL teachers that focus on developing ELL fluency. Therefore, educators might question the idea of teaching Shakespeare to ELLs as an ideal way to improve their speaking and listening skills and overall fluency. Why use complex materials that might at first seem daunting to both teachers and students alike? This paper provides a brief discussion of the benefits of working to improve the language skills of middle school, high school, university, and adult education ELLs who are at the intermediate to advanced levels by using scaffolded adaptions of exercises and activities from the Teaching Shakespeare in the Schools program. This highly successful program, which was designed for native English speaking students, uses the techniques and methods for understanding Shakespeare’s plays that have been developed by the professional theater company Shakespeare & Company in Lenox, Massachusetts, and are taught to literature teachers through their National Institute on Teaching Shakespeare, an aspect of their education program funded by the NEH.

Background
As a participant in the month-long summer intensive Teaching Shakespeare in the Schools program in 2009, I discovered that the methods and techniques created by Shakespeare & Company and designed for teachers of native speakers in English literature classes were similar to the Communicative Approach dominant today in second language learning instruction (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996), particularly in the approaches of James Asher (1977) in terms of heavy emphasis on listening and pairing speech with physicality. For instance, the underlying premise in the Shakespeare Institute is that Shakespeare’s plays are meant to be
“played” (Shakespeare & Company, 2009). Students are not passively learning *Macbeth*, for instance, by reading the play from their desks, but are instead on their feet expressing physically Shakespeare’s words as they speak them. Students not in a particular scene being presented are actively observing as the audience, preparing to respond with comments, observations, and discoveries at the conclusion of the scene. Likewise, James Asher’s (1977) Total Physical Response (TPR) method also recognizes the value of associating language learning with physical activity. ESL teachers know that:

> [t]he TPR classroom is one in which students [do] a great deal of listening and acting…the teacher is the director of a stage play in which the students are the actors…It heavily utilizes the imperative mood. Commands [are] an easy way to get learners to move about and loosen up. (Brown, 2001)

The program’s approach also complements Stephen Krashen’s “comprehensible input” assumption that learning takes place when the language teacher provides inputs slightly above students’ present level of competence (2003). In the Shakespeare Program, students are gradually introduced to the language through whole-body exercises. For instance, students might pose as human sculptures to express words and phrases, create group “snapshots” to capture the essence of a scene, or play a ball toss game to introduce new vocabulary. These types of activities and games prepare them for understanding the story and characters, and the meaning of the language. Krashen maintains, thirty years after Asher’s introduction to TPR as a second language teaching method, that, “TPR works because it is an excellent way of providing students with comprehensible input.” He further adds, “If the Input Hypothesis is correct [in technical terms ‘i+1’], all activities that utilize body movement to make input comprehensible and interesting count as TPR” (1998).

These methods also help students access more of their “multiple human intelligences” recognized by Howard Gardner (1999). He contends that the “most important implication of the [multiple intelligence] theory for the next millennium…is how to best take advantage of the uniqueness conferred on us as a species exhibiting several intelligences” (1999). In this way the Shakespeare & Company program, which allows ELLs to learn using additional intelligences beyond “the ones typically valued in schools” (1999), can give greater opportunities for learning. This allows them to “learn beyond the traditional way which has been typically valued in schools” (1999, p. 42). The program’s methods have been found to allow Shakespeare’s plays to be highly accessible and appealing for students and educators alike.

Before attending the Shakespeare Institute, I had already experienced through their actor training intensive the firsthand benefits of the powerful and transformative effect of the Company’s teachings. I wanted to learn how to provide this for students in the schools—not just native English speakers but for ELLs as well. My belief was that ESL teachers could adapt the exercises and techniques and further cut the script so that their students could receive many of the same benefits as native speakers, in addition to improving their overall second language skills, particularly in the area of speaking and listening.
Why Teach Shakespeare to ELLs?

The first questions that ESL teachers might ask are “Why teach Shakespeare to ELLs at all?” and “What is the value of using any of the methods of the Shakespeare in the Schools program with ESL students?” My rationale for using the complex language and “huge subject matter” (Linklater, 1992, p. xii) of Shakespeare with intermediate to advanced level L2s in middle school, high school, university, and adult education classes who are learning to improve their English language communicative competence is that I believe it can be not only possible but beneficial.

Harvard Project Zero conducted a three-year research study to discover why these programs are so successful with native English speaking students. One of the things they found was that at the core of the Shakespeare program’s pedagogy is “respect for complexity” (Seidel, 1998, p. 82), and based on their findings typical native English speaking adolescents are quite capable of working with Shakespeare’s language. I found this also to be true for the Oakland University ELLs I taught using a scaffolded version of this program. The reason students were able to develop good understanding and connection to the material is because of the time spent explaining and talking about what the words and the language mean using the program’s method of inquiry:

…that incorporates exercises and questioning that turn students from one right way to interpret the play and back at themselves as the source of their understanding…their experience as active readers of complex texts [can go] well beyond their work with Shakespeare's plays and [approach] other literature classes as well as other academic disciplines such as math and physics. (Seidel, 1998, p. 82)

I also think by using Shakespeare’s plays as teaching material, ELLs are capable of powerful engagement with the material. In defense of teaching Shakespeare in the schools, Shakespeare & Company education director Kevin Coleman stated in a National Institute lecture that “it’s the big stories, the big themes that [resonate] most with children” (2009). I found this also to be true in its appeal for the ELLs students that I worked with using the program’s methods. They were excited by the intensity of the themes and the physicality of the activities presented (stage-combat, movement, and games), yet they also appeared somewhat intimidated by the language when they first received written copies of words and shortened speeches from Macbeth. However, I found that this quickly changed once they became involved in the whole-body exercises and techniques, one of which I will be describing shortly called Feeding-In, where students use physical movement with language to express their point of view. The end of program evaluations expressed overwhelmingly positive comments about their increased understanding of the language and their improved pronunciation, as well as their greater confidence in public speaking and trying something new. Said one student, ‘I learned many new vocabulary words and expressions, and now I can understand the script and at the beginning of the project I couldn’t.” Another said, “One unforgettable moment was when I realized I understood the meaning of my speech by Macbeth the moment his wife was dead. It was very touching for me.”

This connection to the language and Shakespeare was further evidenced by participants’ comments that they would now be interested in seeing other plays by Shakespeare, with some of them inspired enough to say they would like to perform again in future plays.
To develop speaking and listening skills, it seems particularly fitting to work with the poetic language of the writer considered the greatest in the English language. Vowels, “the emotional component in word construction,” (Linklater, 1992, p.15) are fundamental to singing as they are to speaking poetry, and it is through access to Shakespeare’s poetic language that the speaker can connect to the “suprasegmental cues of rhythms, stress and intonation, and ‘the music’ of the spoken language” which are important aspects of clear pronunciation (Gilbert, 2005, p. ix) and overall communicative competence. Shakespeare’s “underlying lilt” of stressed and unstressed beats (iambic pentameter), referred to by Shakespeare scholar and Company production advisor Neil Freeman as “ten syllables arranged in five pairs of human heart beats” (2005, p. 2), is also one of the important ways that both speakers and listeners connect to the language on a visceral level. In this way, Shakespeare’s verse creates a more powerful experience and deeper connection to the sounds of English than can be experienced with ordinary prose.

Adapting the Feeding-In Techniques

Feeding-In, a core technique used throughout the program, requires actors to be given their lines by a feeder who stands behind them with the text. It has many applications for other activities in the classroom, and it is particularly useful for ELLs because it allows practice of listening perception and speaking skills. It also gives them the opportunity to practice new vocabulary learned as they express with their body the meaning of words.

While in the native English speaking class Feeding-In allows twice as many students to be involved in a scene (for each actor there is a feeder), this method can be adapted for ELLs by having native L1 English speakers (I enlisted volunteer students from other classes) to serve as feeders. ELLs also work with heavily cut (shortened) scripts.

The feeders speak the line(s) of text clearly and without interpretive inflection to the ELLs who listened and then repeated the line(s) to the audience with their own interpretive inflections of meaning. The teacher reminds them that the exercise is not about “getting it right.” The point of the activity is to “bring the words alive” (Shakespeare & Company, 2005). This allows them to speak lines in a way that does not become rote-like because they are acting out language with emotional responses that are encouraged to be spontaneous and “in the moment,” that is, authentic acts of communication. The ELLs find this especially attractive because they do not have to memorize their lines, and it allows them to use eye contact and full body movement without being encumbered by scripts.

Text Lay-ups: An application of Feeding-In. The Text Lay-ups activity is an example of how Feeding-In is applied to another activity in the classroom. Text Lay-ups is a high-energy icebreaker activity that allows students to begin speaking the language of the text. “Modeled after a basketball lay-up drill” (Shakespeare & Company, 2005), students in the native English speaking class form two lines at the back of the room so that partners run together down to the front of the class, one person being the ‘feeder’ and the other the ‘actor’, to allow the actor to deliver a line of text to the audience of other students. This can be adapted for ESL students so that only one line is formed, consisting of ‘actors’ who take turns running to the front of the room to deliver their line of text that is read to them by a single feeder who is a native English speaker rather than an L2 classmate. The volunteer feeder, who is a L1 English speaker, stands behind the ELL actors and takes a slip of paper out of a hat containing a short phrase of Shakespeare’s text from the play and feeds it to the actor, e.g. “Hail, King of Scotland” or “Out, out, brief candle” (Shakespeare & Company, 2005).
The audience, who are the other ELL students for this activity, are directed to cheer the speaker on, and in this way create an environment that helps build public speaking confidence for the actor and a strong, supportive community among the group. This whole-body learning activity, in addition to supporting the approach of both Asher’s TPR and Krashen’s ‘comprehensible input’ assumptions toward second language learning, also supports current approaches to developing communicative competence that state that kinesthetic tasks “can help students physically internalize pronunciation elements such as rhythm and stress” (Gilbert, 2005, p. xiv).

This listen-and-repeat activity can be particularly helpful in developing listening perception skills for ELLs. If they are unable to discern the actual sounds of English, they cannot possibly reproduce them and make them their own. “Focused listening tasks provide a solid foundation for confident, accurate speaking…[and] help students distinguish between different sounds and stress patterns” (Gilbert, 2005, p. xiii). Having their words given by native English speakers also is important so that no fossilization can occur with nonstandard American English pronunciation patterns.

I have used these methods to teach a scaffolded version of *Macbeth* using the entire Shakespeare in the Schools program, and I have also applied the technique for an adapted Text Lay-up exercise with other literature as an icebreaker exercise on its own. For instance, I taught a unit on ‘superheroes’ for an ESL middle school summer program using the key expressions of the villains and superheroes in a Text Lay-ups exercise that got students excited about the characters and story they were about to read. They practiced speaking and listening skills, gained public speaking confidence, and reported in oral and written self-assessments that they felt a stronger sense of community within the classroom as a result.

*Learning the story of the play.* For ESL teachers who want to go beyond using Feeding-In to expand their own teaching practices, this technique can be used to teach the entire story of one of Shakespeare’s plays, when used along with the program’s other strategies and methods. It is only after the ELLs spend several sessions participating in whole-body communication activities (“the basics”) designed to help students get comfortable with the language, story and characters of the play, they are ready to begin playing out the scenes of the play itself.

Students work with cut scripts of the play. Education director of Shakespeare & Company, Kevin Coleman, suggests using nontraditional casting (e.g., females can play male’s roles and vice versa, several actors can play the same character in different scenes). I find this to work well with ELLs because it allows everyone the opportunity to have at least one speech from a major character. It also allows more acting opportunities for females since most of Shakespeare’s characters are males. Depending on the class size, teachers can assign each student at least one major speech as well as smaller speaking and non-speaking roles, as needed, to tell the story of the play. There can be simple props and minimal costuming, such as a crown for the King, a sash for Macbeth, and baseball caps for messengers (Shakespeare & Company, 2005).

Again, to adapt this method for rehearsals and performance of scenes, ELL actors hand over their scripts to L1 English speakers who serve as their feeders. Using the Feeding-In method and being assigned specific speeches to work on for the remaining weeks, the students are able to imprint phrases in their speeches like “a little song” into their physical memory: “Quality repetition helps students learn the rhythm, melody and sounds of a new language” (Gilbert, 2005), and repeating a short sentence or phrase after listening to a native speaker helps them stay within the rhythmic structure. It helps students “form an acoustic impression of a short piece of
language as a whole and learn it deeply” (Gilbert, 2005, p. xiv).

To maintain the “low-anxiety” environment established in these sessions, which many language researchers including Stephen Krashen, Alice Omaggio Hadley, and Tracy Terrell consider to be particularly important (Young, 1992), a final presentation can be referred to as a work-in-progress or “just another rehearsal.” Creating a low-anxiety setting can allow students to feel free to make mistakes, continue their discovery of ways to speak their lines, and practice speaking and listening skills. They can also feel a sense of community, considered another effective way of creating this productive learning state (Nascente, 2001), as the group performs together before a small, supportive audience of other students or family and friends who can cheer them on for their effort.

Some cut scripts (not adapted but *cut*) can be available by request from the Shakespeare & Company website under their education link. However, teachers will need to do additional cutting for an ESL class. Shakespeare’s expressionistic scenes can be cut extensively and still hold up the plot and language of the story. The Shakespeare & Company website also offers a DVD program titled *Discovering Macbeth* that includes all the exercises and lesson plans needed to teach *Macbeth* along with a one-hour long cutting of the script. The exercises and methods on the DVD can be applied to any of the other Shakespeare plays. The site also provides information on applying for the 5-day Teaching Shakespeare in the Schools program for educators, as well as the National Institute on Teaching Shakespeare, the 4-week program by the NEH. These programs are available for those who want a deeper experience of learning to teach with these methods.

**Evaluation**

ESL teachers can use their own best assessment practices with their students to measure learning in the different skill areas. For a whole language approach, teachers can include reading comprehension and writing assignments. Teachers who want to integrate only speaking and listening skills can also target subskills, such as pronunciation development and vocabulary acquisition strategies, if appropriate.

When I taught a cut version of *Macbeth* to university level ELLs, the students completed self-assessment vocabulary learning strategies checklists at the beginning and end of the program that were used along with student journals, peer discussions, and conferencing (Clair et al., 2001). This complemented the program’s hands-on vocabulary development activities (e.g. a ball toss game and dictionary practice activities). In addition, I recorded the vowel formants of these university students at the beginning and end of the program using Praat software to measure the shifts that occurred, and the results of that study are for a future paper.

**Conclusion**

The Shakespeare in the Schools activities can be scaffolded to offer an exciting way to develop second language skills. Teachers can adapt a single activity, such as text Lay-ups, to expand their own teaching practices. They can also scaffold the entire program to teach one of the plays. Students can be assessed in all or a few of the interrelated skill areas. For instance, teachers could include reading comprehension and writing skills in the teaching of the play, or focus only on speaking and listening skills and include the subskills of pronunciation and vocabulary development. Students can leave with a greater appreciation for English literature in general and Shakespeare in particular. They can gain the confidence to tackle other complex materials. Students are often excited about exploring Shakespeare’s plays further as performers.
or future theatergoers.

In addition to the benefits of the program having similarities to the Communicative Approach to L2 teaching, a scaffolded version of the Shakespeare in the Schools program can allow students to gain access to several of the “multiple human intelligences” recognized by Gardner (1999). In contrast to traditional methods, this whole-body learning method, where students are on their feet for much of the class time, allows ELLs to access those additional multiple intelligences (bodily-kinesthetic, musical, spatial, and the emotional intelligences referred to as interpersonal and intrapersonal) (Gardner, 1999, pp. 41-43) that give greater opportunities for learning.

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References


