Making Shakespeare Fit:
His Place in Our Classrooms

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Abstract

William Shakespeare occupies a well-established, principal role in the English literature classroom around the world. The following seeks to explore the current form and content of his presence in that environment, in order to develop an approach to teaching Shakespearean plays that suits the particular needs of students today living through a transformative period in education due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In order to do so, literary theory, English second-language perspectives, and the digital age is explored. The roles and responsibilities of both teachers and students are defined, and a practical and complete approach is put forward which encompasses the vast array or sporadic research which has accumulated over many decades. A case study is carried out and observations are drawn from such in order to arrive at an approach to teaching Shakespearean plays in the High School English classroom which is both realistic and forward-looking.

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Introduction

William Shakespeare's entrance in an English literature classroom is expected. At some point, that famous playwright will present himself to students. At times it is as an icon, a type of pop star whose presence must be acknowledged. It is difficult to fathom studying English literature while skipping over the works of a poet and playwright whose legacy precedes himself the world around. The elephant in the room cannot be ignored. Perhaps the teacher will present his sonnets, perhaps his plays, or even both. Some will linger on his life and the lively historical period he lived in, while others will dive into their favourite piece. In some form or another, he is sure to be inserted in the curriculum. Whether in mild trepidation or in anxious curiosity, students await him.

Shakespeare's place in English literature curriculums is thus well rooted. Although our world has drastically changed since the time when the author penned his works, there has not been much debate as to whether he should continue to be a part of our lives in some form or another. He simply is. The writer's works have continually pervaded schools in both English as well as non-English speaking countries around the world, implanting themselves as a milestone in English language education. The amount of research and publications regarding the author and his works is immeasurable and has been consistent for the last one hundred and fifty years. The content of such writing generally seems to deal with the same few queries. Firstly, many seek to answer why Shakespeare continues to be so popular many centuries after he has passed. They thus seek to identify what qualities represent his works' greatness. These aspects oscillate between the excellence of use of language, as representative in the 154 Elizabethan sonnets he wrote, as well

as the estimated 1,700 words he introduced and established in the English language through his plays, and the timeless and universal humanity represented in his characters. Scholarly debate abounds on analysis of all his works from a plethora of angles regarding language and themes. It is rather unanimous that whether considering form or content, Shakespeare has rightly earned his place.

The next question many have sought to answer is whether he should be part of a school's literature curriculum. Although the debate on this particular aspect is rare today, it was in fact under great scrutiny up until the middle of the 20th century. Prior, literature departments were focussed on the classics, in particular writings from ancient Rome and Greece.[1] For the English language, medieval works such as Beowulf, or those of Geoffrey Chaucer were considered the staples. Mid-late 19th and early 20th century publications show some teachers' difficulty in attempting to insert Shakespeare's works into the curriculum.[2] He was seen as an important playwright, but not worthy of a place at the table of the legendary. Perhaps some of his works tended to be regarded as vulgar for English society at the time, and thus not appropriate for young students' minds. His presence in the curriculum was thus earned through insistence on the part of those teaching literature. This presence has now been well established not only in English-speaking countries, but in English second language classrooms around the world.

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1 A.F. Blaisdell, "Hints on Teaching Shakespeare," The Massachusetts Teacher, June, Vol. 27, No. 6 (1874), p. 238.

2 Ibid; L.A. McLouth, "The Teaching of Literature in the Secondary Schools: Address Delivered before the Association of New York High School Teachers of German (Conclusion)." *Padagogische Monatshefte / Pedagogical Monthly*, vol. 3, no. 5, 1902; C.L. Maxcy, "Teaching Shakespeare," *The School Review*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1893, pp.105-108; E.M. Tappan, "On Teaching Shakespeare," *The Journal of Education*, vol. 48, no. 20, 1898, pp. 334–335; G.D. Ely, "Teaching Shakespeare," *American Annals of the Deaf*, vol. 66, no. 5, 1921, pp. 437–39; C.M. Gibson, "On Teaching Shakespeare," *The English Journal*, vol. 31, no. 7, 1942, pp. 548–551.

Lastly, of the research dedicated to Shakespeare there exists some addressing teaching Shakespeare in the English language classroom. Although there is near anonymity regarding his presence, there remains great doubt as to how to approach teaching Shakespearean plays. Teachers continue to struggle with how to convey passion for the playwright's works, as well as simply comprehension of the language itself. Some studies simply seek to record the difficulties teachers have had in transmitting the works, as well as the frustration experienced by students. There are piecemeal suggestions on what to do, and not do in the classroom, attempting to salvage what was surely an optimistic project at its outset. There are a number of guidebooks with practical exercises one can apply in the classroom to incite interest, as well as texts that deal with each and every literary theory approach, some of which seek to follow up by identifying which could be applied in classroom literature classes. Recent scholarly articles and books include dealing with Shakespeare in the ESL classroom, and how to make Shakespeare feel relevant to students of different cultures. There are even some publications that present teachers' projects to bring students' productions of scenes or plays to an online medium like YouTube, and what benefits could derive therefrom.[3]

What these publications have in common is that they tend to deal with one of the above issues. That is, they have been dealing with one aspect of the teaching Shakespeare dilemma. There are very few publications that attempt to address more than one of these issues simultaneously. The result is that there are no real guidebooks for teachers to follow. There is no proposed holistic method. If a high school teacher is looking for advice on how to approach teaching Shakespeare, they

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[3] C. Desmet, "Teaching Shakespeare with YouTube," *The English Journal*, vol. 99, no. 1, 2009, pp. 65–70; A. Thompson, "Unmooring the Moor : Researching and Teaching on You Tube," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 61, no. 3, 2017, pp. 337–56.

will be confronted with an overwhelming number of publications on so many sub-topics that they could quite quickly abandon ship and simply stick to the textbook. The problem with this is that texts available to high school teachers for English Literature in Italy tend to be mono-directional.[4] They all approach literature from the exact same starting point, and go forward in the same linear pattern. First, they explain the historical period in question, then the author's biography, and then the works. For Shakespeare, the pages regarding his work are usually reduced to a sonnet or two, and then one or two of his plays. For the latter the discussion includes a brief plot description, followed by an excerpt, and then a commentary on themes and symbols from the play. It is exactly the same formula every time. The exercises are purely written, analysing the text, or might include a prompt to discuss an issue arisen from the excerpt's content. There is no invitation to experience theatre, performance, to explore what the language sounds like when read aloud, no role plays or even clips from film versions, nor are there exercises which seek to ask the students their opinion on the value or relevance therein. They are all incredibly dull and predictable. The result is that the responsibility comes back to the teacher if they wish to make the topic at all interesting. In order for a teacher to approach this challenge, they need clear and well-organised information that includes a holistic proposal to apply in the classroom.

It is thus precisely in this void that a potential for improvement has been found. Teaching is a practical field, where one attempts to accomplish various feats at the same time. In an ideal world a teacher sets out to inform, encourage, instruct,

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[4] Arturo Cattaneo and Donatella De Flaviis, *Millennium Concise*, Mondadori Education S.p.A., 2012; M.C. Gambi, and P.C. Pirazzoli, *LiteraTour*, Trinity Whitebridge, 2017; Giulia Lorenzoni, et al., *Insights into Literature*, De Agostini Scuola SpA, 2015; Silvia Maglioni, et al., *Time Machines*. De Agostini Scuola SpA, 2018; Mauro Spicci, et al., *Amazing Minds*, Pearson Italia, 2021.

develop, care for, discipline, educate, instil, impart, inspire, enlighten, support and familiarise youth. With the expectations laid upon teachers from ministries of education there is also a specific chunk of information as well as particular competences students are expected to learn and acquire. It is precisely in the quest to define, explain and deliver upon these expectations in the realm of English literature and specifically William Shakespeare's plays that the relevant research and publications come up short. Teachers need support, and such should be accessible, comprehensive and clear in order to be effective. It is not that there is a lack of information available: it is more that it is scattered over an array of disciplines and perspectives and covers many modalities, from magazine articles to textbooks, to academic publications. They are also piecemeal, rarely dealing with the various aspects that make up the complexity that is teaching Shakespeare. Lastly but perhaps most importantly, research is lacking in the effects of the most recent changes to our world that have shaken the stability of the teaching environment.

One major factor that has contributed to this challenge in recent years is the development of the digital humanities, which recognised the need and utility in integrating digital skills and mediums into the English literature curriculum. Exactly how to go about doing that has undergone significant debate over the past thirty years, and the goals imbedded within this approach have been catapulted to the forefront of teacher training since the onset of the global Covid-19 pandemic. The classroom is no longer what it was prior to 2020. The classroom is now a figurative, fluid space that should exist within whatever environment or medium is conceded at the moment. Teachers are expected to manage teaching completely online as well as in the classroom with some students online and others physically in front of them. Under a mask-wearing mandate students have to imagine a

teacher's facial expressions and strain to comprehend their words. This factor has particularly affected teachers of English as a second language, as the movement of the mouth contributes greatly to comprehension. Teachers in turn must do double-time attempting to make themselves understood and even more challenging make classes interesting notwithstanding all the restrictions. Moreover, where does Shakespeare specifically stand within this digital classroom? Teachers have to confront how to present his plays using the mediums and tools available, taking advantage of what is available online and coordinating classrooms to navigate through the channels the pandemic has restricted us to. This could be viewed as a challenge, or as I prefer to view it, an opportunity. There has been no time to waste over the past two years. Teachers have needed to act on all that the digital humanities have been pushing for years, and innovate their teaching methods. This is not a task they should be taking on alone, but a reliable, structured, informative approach to digital training for teachers needs to be adopted by institutions preparing those seeking to becoming teachers, as well as supporting those who already are. Shakespeare has yet again faced another trying period, and is perhaps going through transformation.

Teaching Shakespeare needs to be reviewed again in order to encompass today's drastically changed teaching environment. The relevance of his works needs to be reaffirmed. We need to look at what literary theories still apply and how to navigate through digital approaches and material. We need to consider the needs of students, both in a practical and an emotional sense, since these past three teaching years have been highly stressful for them as well as for all those working in schools. Shakespeare can maintain his place if teachers are able to adapt his works to this new situation. It thus depends less on what his works actually are, as

opposed to what one decides to do with them in the classroom. In the Italian context, like in the majority of countries where Shakespeare is studied, approaches need to be developed to address the great variety of cultural perspectives which are peering into his works, as well as the heightened linguistic difficulties that might be encountered throughout the journey in the curriculum.

By contemplating the above we have much to gain. Through an honest look at the situation today in Italian high school English literature classrooms, we can identify the challenges students and teachers are dealing with, and the potential which a different approach to Shakespeare might offer. With the opportunities and limitations clear, an approach to teaching Shakespeare in the classroom can be sorted out. Most importantly, Shakespeare's place in the classroom can be defined according to who the students of today are and what they need. Every teacher knows their material needs to be tailored to their students. You cannot just reuse old lessons year after year. It simply does not work. Students change, and along with them so do their teachers and the material that moves between them.

The goal of an English literature teacher when presenting Shakespeare should thus be kept in mind. What do we hope to achieve by bringing the Bard's work to our students' attention? I would argue that we hope they appreciate its magic, that they see parts of themselves and their loved ones in the various characters, that they hear how easily the words roll off one's tongue and change their mood, that they think it strange that someone who wrote these plays so long ago can still be so popular, and thus perhaps think it worthwhile to watch, listen to, and or read some of his works. More than just Shakespeare, students might come away with a better understanding of what drama is, and a personal ability to express themselves through a new artform. Perhaps students will enjoy English class, and

wonder whether there are other authors and playwrights worth knowing of. Students may in fact come out of their experience with Shakespeare feeling they are to some degree competent in the language, able to handle such a difficult playwright's work, even if English is not their first language. The possible benefits are so great it is certainly worth taking the time to formulate a strategy for the classroom.

This is precisely what this work sets out to do. The following seeks to explore the current status of Shakespeare within the English literature high school classroom, in both Anglophone as well as English second language classrooms in the world. Particularly strong influences on the current teaching environment due to the world pandemic must be taken into consideration when contemplating any teaching method. If an approach to teaching Shakespeare in the English classroom is to be healthy and beneficial, it needs to take on a practical and holistic nature. Teachers need clear and pragmatic guidance in a digestible format. This is precisely what is being sought here. The goal is to arrive at an approach to teaching Shakespeare that is solidly rooted in the rich background of publications in existence while all the while looking toward the future of literature classrooms. It thus seeks to recognise where we currently are and where we wish to go with Shakespeare, without forgetting what has come before.

With this in mind, the starting point shall be an exploration of literary theory in order to identify the soundest approach for youth in the classroom, distinguishing an ultimate goal for students of Shakespeare. How Shakespeare's presence in the classroom has changed since the onset of the digital humanities era shall then be contemplated, attempting to place its evolution within the current needs of the classroom due to drastic changes spurred by the Covid-19 pandemic. The new expectations and possibilities for teachers today shall be outlined and specific

proposals and benefits shall be laid out for teaching Shakespearean plays. Consideration shall be made for the high school English Second Language student, because these students make up the vast majority of those studying Shakespeare today in the world. Different perspectives bring enrichment to the classroom, but any teaching method must carefully contemplate an approach that keeps these particular needs in mind.

The implications of the abovementioned research shall be brought together with the sole purpose of identifying a thorough, sensible and sensitive approach to teaching Shakespearean plays in the high school classroom. The next chapters shall thus focus on the challenge of teaching Shakespeare and what might be a flexible approach which encompasses the three-fold needs of the digital age, ESL students and what today's high school students need. This shall focus on putting theory into practice, outlining the role of teachers and the benefits that might be reaped for students. Where performance fits in the classroom as well as what a classroom actually is today shall be contemplated, seeking to give students a sense of responsibility for their own development in their path through education. Theories connected to acquisition of English language skills shall be analysed for their validity in the case of learning Shakespeare, which shall bring us to contemplate the language in the texts being studied, and how to manage its presence in the lessons. In the plethora of suggestions of how to manage difficult Shakespearean scripts preferable means shall be outlined, which will in turn lead to a moment of focus on not just the content that is presented but the form with which it is applied. Digitalised classrooms require competent teachers who are able to lead students as they build their competences. Thus, steps need to be taken to prepare teaching staff properly before they can apply any methods that involve digital tools. Lastly, the

place of students in the classroom today shall be depicted in order to keep in mind the ultimate goals teaching has set for our current reality, as well as the students' needs to be fulfilled and how teachers can tailor the method to suit those needs.

In order to test the approach, a case study was carried out on a group of three different year 8 classes in a lower secondary school. The institute was a semi-private school where students receive three hours of English instruction per week. The objective was to identify the strength of the teaching method proposed, thus isolate any weak points in order to then correct them and conclude with a tried-and-true approach which teachers can choose to implement in part or in full. The project took place over the course of six weeks and involved the teaching of one specific Shakespearean play: *Romeo and Juliet.* The study involved a theoretical and a practical part, culminating in the presentation of parts of a scene from the play by students. In order to broaden the conclusions, feedback was collected from the students and recorded. Observations were made as to the effectiveness of the method put in practice, and suggestions for improvements were defined. Since the aim of this work was to make a concrete proposal for teachers to apply in the classroom when teaching Shakespeare, this part of the investigation was considered of the utmost importance. Only in this way can this work move out of the realm of the theoretical, and assume a place in the practical world that is the English literature classroom.

<center>Chapter 1</center>

<center>**Literature Review and Discussion**</center>

1.1 Introduction

Understanding the place of Shakespeare in the high school English literature classrooms of the world requires an initially broad approach. If we are to truly arrive at an understanding of where we are and what we would like to accomplish in the classroom, we must have a clear idea of the role of Shakespeare in education over time, taking into consideration both theory and practice. The following will initially investigate Shakespeare's presence within literary theory historically, and how this applies to the teaching of the Bard's work. The utility in this is to understand how we might interpret the rhyme and reason, as well as the method, for teaching Shakespeare today. It can thus help to understand the evolution of literary theory as a driver of teaching approaches, because "theories [...] inform and direct practice."[5] Shakespeare has been canonical for quite a long time, but that does not mean that this position has never been, or is not currently, hotly debated. Literary theories seek to root the playwright's relevance in concepts related to one approach or another. These attempts come from different starting points, but the objective remains the same: how to interpret Shakespeare's relevance in order to justify its continuing presence and how to apply these concepts to teaching Shakespeare.

The next logical step is to address Shakespeare's persistence in high school education on a world scale over time, giving special attention to its place during the insurgence of the digital humanities era, as well as its application thereafter. The

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[5] R. Gibson, *Teaching Shakespeare*, 9th edition, Cambridge University Press, 2005, page xi.

justifications for teaching Shakespeare, as well as the methodology for its implementation shall be explored, while attempting to identify evolutions in practice. My focus will lie on the past thirty years, from the onset of the digital humanities era to our recent push to complete online education. Over this period, we have perhaps seen the greatest change in teaching methods since the advent of the introduction of the national teaching systems, through the shift in the medium of delivery. Classroom teaching, and online teaching, are two different species, requiring different approaches. Literature as a subject is in evolution due to this shift, and thus requires our close attention.

Lastly, time will be given to the particularities teaching Shakespeare presents in the English second language classroom. There are more English foreign language speakers in the world today than there are mother-tongue speakers. English language and literature is one of most common foreign language subjects in high school curriculums the world around. It is therefore incomplete to conceive of an approach for teaching this subject without contemplating the fact that an immense quantity of students will be approaching Shakespeare from the lens of a non-English, non-mother-tongue perspective. The allowance for studying this diversity could lead us to a need to modify the approach in order to cater to the different language needs as well as bringing us to reconsider the current justifications for Shakespeare's place within this subject area.

1.2 Shakespeare's literary interpretation

A starting point for approaching the difficulty in Shakespeare's work may be simply to accept that it is complicated due to its age. Contemplating works that are hundreds of years old inevitably signifies that we are not only dealing with works

which would have been received differently at their time of performance, but that they have been, in one way or another, continually rewritten ever since by those who read them.[6] Thus, when we read a Shakespearean play, we participate in a kind of rewriting of the text, sub-consciously changing it in order to link it to our times and our culture. We are unable to remove the lens of our present-day perspective. We therefore need first of all to accept that the Shakespeare we experience is not the Shakespeare of *his* time, but of *ours*. It is utterly impossible to have a reading that is equal to an original reading because there are only "multiple and continuing engagements with a script which exceeds each of its [historically contingent] readings."[7] Moreover, as Graham Bradshaw stated,[8] all of what has come to pass in the meantime, all of the intervening commentary since Shakespeare, is relevant to how our lens has been shaped and can be considered inseparable from any related discourse. We cannot pretend the last four hundred years did not happen. We will never be Elizabethans. This should not be understood as a problem *per se*, but simply an acknowledgment that there is no such thing as a pure literary interpretation.[9]

Although literary theory has historically been divided into 3 stages, with the focus being on either the author, exclusively the text, or an attention to the reader, it is argued that any approach today should necessarily include all three. We must consider the author, carefully study the text, but also pay attention to the reader, that is, to us. We must be conscious of our appropriation of the text, without judging or blaming our inherent modern-day perspectives. It is from this premise that I

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[6] T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2008), p. 11.
[7] S. Goldhill, *Sophocles and the Language of Tragedy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[8] G. Bradshaw, *Shakespeare's Scepticism*, The Harvester Press Limited, 1987.
[9] T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2008), p. 13.

begin by considering approaches in new historicism and presentism, merely two of the many perspectives adopted over the years. The former is a critical movement from the 1970s which suggests that the original reception, that is how lines from a Shakespearean play would have been interpreted by people at that time, should illuminate how we interpret it today. It purports that for example, understanding the relevant historical concepts of witchcraft, regicide and kinship can help us understand the hidden meanings inserted in the play *Macbeth*. It is true that through such a study of a Shakespearean play, we can better understand some of the choices the playwright made, as well as those of the characters themselves throughout the action. In the case of Lady Macbeth, for example, a look at how the female reproductive organs were understood, as well as concepts of witchcraft, madness and hysteria in the Elizabethan period, inform the reader as to how the character would have been viewed at that time, as well as how a woman with these characteristics would have been treated by that society.[10] The shortcomings of such an approach are however substantial. This does not help the reader to understand the character herself, that is to understand what is really happening to Lady Macbeth. We are no further along in understanding her difficulties, precisely because the understanding of mental illness at that time was very limited. There is no reason to limit ourselves by ignoring what we have come to know about this area of medicine over the centuries. The second problem is a practical one: we can't really expect students of English today to be interested in these dated concepts. How can teenagers of today possibly be interested in the intricacies of, for example, royal

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[10] J. Levin, "Lady Macbeth and the Daemonologie of Hysteria," ELH, Vol. 69, No. 1 (2002), pp. 21-55.

succession, when we have not had a royal family in our country for almost eighty years.

Presentism seeks to respond to this movement by proposing a critical orientation which strives to find contemporary problems in older texts. By utilising our present knowledge to recognise elements in a text, presentism can provide a new understanding.[11] In the case of Lady Macbeth, concepts of post-partum depression can be applied in order to better comprehend the character, or one could use the play in order to ponder the behaviour of tyrants and other violent rulers of today in the hopes that it might provide us with answers for our current lot. Thus, old meanings can cast light on our current reality, and things we have learned in recent years can help us solve old mysteries. Looking at a Shakespearean play from our point of view "legitimately closes the distance between us and early modern audiences and may tell us more about the lived experience of women at that time than historicism alone will reveal."[12] When considering the question of today's student audience, making links to modern knowledge, discoveries, and currently lived situations would certainly engage the reader in the text more easily, creating a relatability which could serve as a starting point for discovering the play. Approaching Shakespeare in this way could help to introduce these plays "into dialogue with local and contemporary issues, values, and modes of expression,"[13] thus maintaining its relevance in time.

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[11] C. Couche, "A Mind Diseased: Reading Lady Macbeth's Madness," in *Word and Self Estranged in English Texts*, 1550-1660 (United Kingdom: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010), p. 138.
[12] Ibid, at 147.
[13] D.M. Colarusso, "Rhyme and Reason: Shakespeare's Exceptional Status and Role in Canadian Education," in *Shakespeare and Canada* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2017), p. 234.

Currently, new historicism is relatively dominant in literature studies, inviting readers to find historical relevance and revelation in every line they read.[14] There is however great criticism of the tendency of this approach to imprison texts within their historical concepts,[15] and instead there is a recent invitation for us to apply less strict practices to literary theory. Presentism, instead, tends to fall out of favour, because it may cause "an unrecuperable distortion of the past."[16] Regardless, at its roots, presentism is an attractive method of interpretation as it seeks to give importance and relevance of old texts to the contemporary world. This factor, when contemplating the method of high school literature instruction, is of greater import. Perhaps elements of both approaches to teaching literature could be successfully woven together in order to produce the greatest possible level of interest and comprehension. Both seek to make the texts relevant; both ask the question: How can we use this text to say something useful today?

This persistent dichotomy between the two approaches in a high school environment begs the question: must presentism necessarily annihilate historicism? Not necessarily. One should take a step back from this ongoing debate in order to grasp a new perception of literary theory. In fact, the ongoing debate between the two has tended to shift over the past decade, moving away from the argument of the application of either one or the other, and instead moving into a more fluid concept which recognizes the possibility of the past to "gain some critical purchase on the present,"[17] rather than the other way around, allowing for critical theory to move between genres, periods, authors, styles, and any other artificially created

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[14] Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Jay Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, Chicago: University of Chicago P, 2000, p. 9.
[15] R. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, Chicago: University of Chicago P, 2015, p. 157.
[16] B. Morgan, "Scale, Resonance, Presence," *Victorian Studies*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2016, pp. 109–110.
[17] Ibid, at 109.

boundaries in order to draw spectrums of interconnectedness which are inherently relevant today. In such a way, we liberate ourselves from the entrapment of applying a singular literary perspective that limits our approach to teaching the subject, and instead open up the possibility of a flexible approach to the English literature curriculum.

This could lead us towards a rupture with the literary theory categories applied to teaching, freeing ourselves from the current rigid approach in high school English literature curriculums in Italy and elsewhere, where a particular historical period is laid out, followed by the biographies of the relevant writers, and is finished with the works of those writers. The approach is always chronological, and static. If we were instead to focus on literature as being interconnected over time, perhaps cyclical, responsive and interactive, we would allow ourselves to appreciate the aesthetic value of the writing first and foremost. As Bloom argues, there is intrinsic aesthetic power in the works themselves, and we should not focus on its ability to illuminate other disciplines like history, geography, political science or linguistics.[18] In fact, many English literature teachers spend more time on the historical and political background, or on the details of the lives of the authors, poets and playwrights, than they do on the works they produced. In the case of Shakespeare, it is easy to admit that Queen Elizabeth, the Renaissance in England, conflicts with continental Europe and the life of Shakespeare and the mysteries surrounding him are far easier to teach to teenagers than the sonnets or plays themselves. In the end, students tend to spend very little time exploring the actual texts. Tellingly, recent research indicates that critical literary approaches are

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[18] H. Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, Macmillan, 1995.

actually more of a hinderance in the educational realm than help, simply because they "tend to ignore the text itself."[19]

It is suggested that this runs contrary to the very justification of teaching Shakespeare. Or perhaps, it merely brings us to contemplate the subtle difference revealed in the following question: Are we teaching Shakespeare because his work presents such universal themes, such relevance to all societies in a timeless manner that we are better able to address our current lot, or because his work provokes an intense sense of connectedness, relatability, and thus an immensely rich sensorial and intellectual reaction when experienced, that is, when read, listened to, or watched? I believe that in fact the former is simply the tip of iceberg, and the real cause of our continued attachment to the Bard's work is this intensely rich subjective space created between the text and reader. The latter does not strike out the former, but merely leads us to travel deeper, linking the texts to an idea of experience and thus to the reader, listener or viewer.

The concept of this space is not new,[20] but the aesthetic experience is one that seems to have difficulty in taking hold among recent literary theorists, perhaps because it is simply a more slippery concept to pin down, and tends to be connected to traditional concepts which have been decidedly rejected over the past three decades. This subjective space is not easily defined, nor is it static. Instead, it exists in both the text itself and the personal response of the reader.[21] Thus, it intrinsically foresees an attachment between the reader, listener or viewer, that is the student,

[19] A.S. Cuthbert, "English Literature," *What Should Schools Teach? Disciplines, Subject and the Pursuit of Truth*, edited by Cuthbert and Standish, Alex, UCL Press, 2021, p. 64.
[20] W. Iser, *The Art of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response,* Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.
[21] D.P. Deneau, "Review of the Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response by Wolfgang Iser," *International Fiction Review*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1980, p. 76.

and the poem, play or novel, that is the text. What better way to foster interest, appreciation and a life-long relationship with literature is there than to personally involve the student? None, it is argued. The idea of employing the concept of aesthetic value is not to propose another layer of literary theory for the teaching of literature, but rather to strip away the tendency to apply categories of thought and lenses of interpretation and allow the text and the reader to come as close together as possible, thus allowing for subjectivity and personal experience. As Cuthbert recently said, "Direct opinions are a starting point […], not an end point; linguistic or historical analysis should embellish or refine, but not substitute, the aesthetic experience."[22] Thus, a high school approach to literature could allow for students to experience the texts as they were meant to be, allowing for the possibility of various techniques of literary theory to enter the discussion when relevant, while maintaining the focus on the works themselves.

The ongoing debates in literary theory recognise an implicit value in the works they ponder, and thus in our case they signal that the societies from which they emerge see great utility in the study of Shakespeare. By their very interacting discourse they also underline the difficulty inherent in the study of these works. If the study by literary theorists and critics is so varied and conflicting, one can only imagine the difficulty of a teacher in presenting Shakespeare to a classroom. The idea that teaching Shakespeare is hard is one that can be dated back at least one hundred and fifty years. Articles by teachers immediately underline this conundrum, that it is "especially difficult to teach the young pupil to be interested in Shakespeare. Most of his plays begin hard; the dialogue of the drama, the peculiar

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[22] A.S. Cuthbert, "English Literature," p. 68.

idioms, figures and obscure references all tend to discourage the reader."[23] This challenge has been continually restated throughout the years, indicating there is literature far easier to teach than Shakespeare.[24] Considering this ongoing challenge, the first question that comes to mind is then: why teach it?

While teaching Shakespeare has become the norm the world round in English classrooms, it was not always so. It was not even the case in English speaking countries in the 19th century. Introducing Shakespeare into the classroom was a hope of some in education, whose objective was to make Shakespeare's plays as common to the curriculum as the study of the great authors of Greece and Rome.[25] Since then, there has been a very decided push to introduce Shakespeare into all high school curricula of English-speaking countries despite the difficulty it carries in teaching it. It thus becomes clear that its value outweighs its difficulty, as it has consistently been praised for its universality, an aspect which leads to "more hope of establishing a connection with the mind of every pupil."[26] It is in fact held up as being

> ideal material for the high-school classroom. The stories are captivating, the play lengths are suitable, the adult content is rarely inappropriate or gratuitous, and the large corpus offers abundant versatility: drama, poetry, and prose rolled into one, a variety of themes and genres, and the potential for memorable trips to the theatre to complement and extend classroom study.[27]

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[23] A.F. Blaisdell, "Hints on Teaching Shakespeare," p. 237.
[24] W. Bell, *The Development of the Ontario High School,* Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1918, p. 127.
[25] A.F. Blaisdell, "Hints on Teaching Shakespeare," p. 238.
[26] E.M. Tappan, "On Teaching Shakespeare," p. 334.
[27] D.M. Colarusso, "Rhyme and Reason: Shakespeare's Exceptional Status and Role in Canadian Education," p. 226.

Its appropriateness for the classroom setting has thus been established and its presence now extends far beyond English-speaking countries, and is to be found in English curricula all over the world.

The degree of Shakespeare's presence, as well as the justification for such, have however gone in a very decided direction since the 1980s, when academic and teaching material began to shift the focus of teaching Shakespeare. Firstly, the study of Shakespeare moved away from the literary theories of the time that had been introducing a plethora of controversial perspectives,[28] which challenged not only the interpretation but also the significance of the Bard's works.[29] Secondly, it moved away from the playwright's actual works, and strongly towards the needs and interests of the taught. Students have become the focus, particularly in the 21st century. Their level of interest and involvement have become the barometers of a teacher's success. The goal is to engage the students, make them feel connected by seeking to make the works as relevant to their lives as possible. Shakespeare has thus been increasingly turned into a vehicle or instrument used in order to address a particular issue directly relevant to the students: "The primary objective is not to learn about the plays themselves, but to use the plays as a frame to explore a specific issue."[30]

The plays are still considered to deal with universal themes, to be "relevant to our humanity,"[31] yet there is a recognition that they are at the same time quite far

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[28] These perspectives include, but are not limited to: feminism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, deconstruction, new historicism, presentism and reception theory. R. Gibson, *Teaching Shakespeare*, 2005.
[29] Ibid, at 26.
[30] F. Banks, *Creative Shakespeare: The Globe Education Guide to Practical Shakespeare*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2014, p. 205.
[31] Ibid.

from the present reality. And with this the plays themselves, and their aesthetic value as literature, become of lesser import compared to the emotional and psychological needs of students. They become mere "vehicles for exploration and teaching,"[32] creating spaces where students can "reflect on their own feelings."[33] This should not be confused with the previously detailed connection between the reader/viewer/listener and the works: here the suggestion is that Shakespeare be used to connect the student not to the works and any aesthetic power they might have, but the modern-day issue it is being used to address. In fact, the relevance of the plays is currently claimed to lie precisely in the vast array of opportunities they provide for reinterpretation,[34] given that the relationships present with the play are blatantly recognisable and seem to suffer no damage over time. One example is Juliet's teenage detachment from her parents: the latter's inability to understand their daughter leads directly to her demise. It is common, but certainly not a cliché to say that a great number of teenagers feel their parents simply cannot understand them. The ability to relate to Shakespeare's characters draws the reader or viewer into a direct interaction with personal issues from morality to gender, from justice to politics.

The suggestion emerging from the Globe Education Guide is in fact that teaching sessions be created in order to address a particular issue.[35] Thus the issue itself is the purpose and driver of the lesson. Shakespeare, in this context, is but a tool. The inherent value in the texts themselves is secondary at best, and again we find ourselves in front of a situation where sociological relevance trumps the

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[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] R. Gibson, *Teaching Shakespeare,* p. 2.
[35] F. Banks, *Creative Shakespeare: The Globe Education Guide to Practical Shakespeare*, p.206.

aesthetic value of the works. In fact, since the 1990s the perspectives on why and how to teach Shakespeare, although varied, have been united in rejecting all traditional literary theories including that "literature and drama should be studied for aesthetic reasons rather than for social or ideological purposes."[36] By consequence, the individual *uses* the texts, rather than experiences and interacts with them. Thus, it appears we are teaching Shakespeare in 2022 because it lends itself well to making literature lessons personal, addressing issues which students are grappling with in their lives. The projects promoted by the Globe Education sustain that Shakespeare's plays "provide a framework for personal and social development," and that afterwards students may come out these studies with a better understanding of themselves, humanity, and the world in general,[37] not of Shakespeare's works. Perhaps then they should not be called literature classes, but psychological and sociological wellness through the arts. In any case, as one teacher emphasizes, while it is certainly important to underline the link between Shakespeare's work and the students' own lives, the goal is "to encourage students to start forging their own connections,"[38] rather than focusing on the specific issues. By connections, it is intended those with the work itself.

1.3 Shakespeare's persisting relevance in the digital age

The above-mentioned shift in perspective seems to have come about in concurrence with the onset and development of the digital humanities era. Although

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[36] R. Gibson, *Teaching Shakespeare,* p. 27.
[37] Brian Parkinson and Helen Reid Thomas, *Teaching Literature in a Second Language*, Edinburgh University Press, 2010, p. 206.
[38] A. Noor Desai, "Topical Shakespeare and the Urgency of Ambiguity," *Teaching Social Justice Through Shakespeare*, edited by Hillary Eklund and Wendy Beth Hyman, Edinburgh University Press, 2019.

computers had been present and part of the lives of those working in the humanities since the 1970s, it was in the late 1980s that the digital humanities developed a structured apparatus, particularly present in English departments.[39] It is "a field of study, research, teaching, and invention concerned with the intersection of computing and the disciplines of the humanities."[40] Information is collected and analysed in its electronic form and these very mediums are then observed in order to understand how they affect the discipline in question, for example experiencing Shakespeare through reading the script online versus experiencing its performance on a stage. The inverse is also considered, that is "what these disciplines have to contribute to our knowledge of computing."[41] It is thus a two-way street, where literature can be studied, explored and preserved within a digital sphere, and in turn the very nature of literature could affect the development of the medium. In this field digital tools are developed in order to "visualize and analyze data, share and annotate primary sources, discuss and publish findings, [as well as] collaborate on research and teaching."[42] An example is the creation of The Shakespeare Quartos Archive, a digital, searchable tool to provide online access to each of the thirty-two quarto copies of *Hamlet*.[43]

The digital humanities should not, however, be understood as the use of specific technological tools: they are more akin to a "methodological outlook,"[44]

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[39] C. Selfe, "Computers in English Departments: The Rhetoric of Technopower," *ADE Bulletin*, vol. 90, 1988, pp. 63–67.

[40] M. Kirschenbaum, "What Is Digital Humanities and What's It Doing in English Departments?" *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, edited by Matthew K. Gold, University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

[41] J. Drucker, et al. *Introduction to the Digital Humanities*, UCLA, 2014.

[42] A. Sanders Garcia, *Introduction to the Digital Humanities*. 2018, https://asandersgarcia.humspace.ucla.edu/courses/dh101f18/.

[43] The Shakespeare Quartos Archive is a jointly-funded program between the U.K.'s Joint Information Systems Committee and the National Endowment for the Humanities, recently archived but still available at: https://wayback.archive-it.org/org-467/20191016094633/http://quartos.org/.

[44] M. Kirschenbaum, "What Is Digital Humanities and What's It Doing in English Departments?".

which is applied in order to connect various people working within the same field. In fact, they have been described as "a social undertaking"[45] where networks are facilitated, resulting in a particularly "strong sense of community and common purpose."[46] Thus it seems that technology can help us foster and sustain relationships, in particular when circumstances do not allow for the people involved to be in direct contact. On a larger scale, the digital humanities are seen to encourage even cross-disciplinary cooperation, creating truly original results in the academic sphere.[47] Certainly, this is particularly true when contemplating a teacher-student relationship hindered by an international pandemic which has brought many into distance or high-flex learning. Moreover, within the realm of English departments, the digital humanities have proceeded without resistance perhaps due to the fact that text lends itself well to digital manipulation: "text-based data processing […] was within the capabilities of even some of the earliest computer systems."[48] Additionally, the connection between creation of text through composition and computers has evidently been long established. Thus, today we may witness the position of the digital humanities as being the strongest within many English departments.

The demands on students in high school English classes have undergone tailoring due to the digital humanities. Students are being taught how to manage and utilise digital tools in order to experience, interact, study and learn from the texts in the curriculum. The very premise of digital humanities, and by consequence any concept of digital pedagogy, is that digital tools are vehicles for drawing

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[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] W.G. Thomas III, et al. "Teaching and the Digital Humanities," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, vol. 68, no. 4, 2015, pp. 36.
[48] M. Kirschenbaum, "What Is Digital Humanities and What's It Doing in English Departments?".

students closer to the material they must study and learn. As students learn how to navigate within and manipulate these tools, they become more active in their own learning process. In fact, one of the goals in teaching in the digital humanities is "developing students as producers in the digital medium, rather than only as consumers of digital content."[49] Many teachers at various levels are thus pushing students closer to the works they are studying, by utilising the digital tools available, causing them to become more active in their own learning process, as well as encouraging their creative growth by providing the opportunity to become productive agents within the digital medium.[50] The digital humanities engage with the digital on various levels, namely as a "tool, study object, and medium,"[51] and the literature classroom can potentially embrace all three simultaneously, as students learn how and why the digital is relevant, what tools are available to them, and how they can become actors within its mediums.

For students at the high school level, the application of the above-mentioned may begin simply by teaching students digital literacy,[52] so that they have the instruments to apply to their English literature studies. The goal which is repeatedly stated is to bring students into an active, productive, and personalized role with literature. Interestingly, this goal comes into line with the didactic approaches to Shakespeare of recent years where students are involved, creating a personalised experience with the works. It thus appears that the digital humanities and the current pedagogy for Shakespeare share a common vision of the student. It is however suggested that the first step be taken with teachers: a fundamental part of their

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[49] W.G. Thomas III, et al. "Teaching and the Digital Humanities," p. 33.
[50] Ibid.
[51] P. Svensson, "Introducing the Digital Humanities," *Big Digital Humanities*, University of Michigan Press: Digitalculturebooks, 2016, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv65sx0t.
[52] Ibid, at 34.

professional preparation and ongoing training should be digital literacy and pedagogy, so that students may in turn develop the necessary skills and knowledge. It follows logically that digital competency cannot be learned if the teacher has not been taught first.

There is currently a plethora of digital tools available to students studying Shakespeare. Besides electronic versions of texts made freely available online, one can easily access all types of relevant material, including multimedia background material on the playwright and the playhouses where his plays took place, an endless amount of professional performances of the plays, amateur interpretations including student attempts at recreating scenes from plays they are studying at school, audio versions of the plays read aloud by famous actors and actresses, historical maps and images, and so forth. The amount of digital information available is endless, which is precisely where the teacher's role becomes clear: to adequately prepare students to be able to navigate within the resources, learning how to identify what is relevant and worthy of their attention. The hope is that "the use of digital search tools and editions gives [students] an easier route into the text, particularly where language may be something of a barrier to understanding."[53] The support offered by teachers needs to be ongoing, and direct training of students on how to use digital tools would need to be initiated from the beginning of any course. Students can thus reach a level of comfort with digital tools and by consequence will spend their time better afterwards by focusing on the literature itself. In order to maintain that focus, the teacher's role is critical, as the students' ability to utilise

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[53] R. Davies, *The Pérez Galdos Editions Project: Creating Electronic Scholarly Editions*, CTI Centre for Textual Studies, 1999.

web elements seems to lead directly to them feeling "more confident and relaxed with the subject matter."[54]

University of Oxford's Humanities Computing Development Team[55] Coordinator Sarah Porter sustains simple rules in order to successfully apply technology to teaching, the first of which is precisely that "technology should not be used to replace teachers or teaching."[56] The role of the teacher seems to become more specific, but no less vital to the learning process, facilitating students' learning in order to render them capable of critically using resources found online. With this approach, completely in-line with the approach to teaching Shakespeare as a high school subject, students are active participants in their learning, depending on the teacher's ability to competently choose the resources as well as instruct students on how to navigate through them. Moreover, there is a recognition that online material students come across may not be neutral, and so it becomes an important skill to be able to analyse the integrity of material and build critical thinking skills.[57] Thus, in order to be effective, there must be a healthy balance between presenting relevant content and using technology in an appropriate manner.[58]

This ability to utilise digital technology is one that would prove invaluable to students, as such technology is to be found the world around within, but also far beyond, the humanities. Therefore, the skills students could potentially learn and apply in their literature classes would serve them well for any subject they might

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[54] S. Porter, "Technology in Teaching Literature and Culture: Some Reflections," *Computers and the Humanities*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2000, pp. 315.
[55] For information on what the HCDT does see: Porter, Sarah. *Humanities Computing Development Team (HCDT)*. https://webs.ucm.es/info/especulo/hipertul/HCUreport/sarah.htm. Accessed 4 Dec. 2021.
[56] Ibid, at 316.
[57] W.G. Thomas III, et al. "Teaching and the Digital Humanities," p. 41.
[58] Ibid, at 323.

be studying at the time, or in the future. As is literature in and of itself, digital technology is relevant to various aspects of students' lives, for it can "incorporate different perspectives, modes of engagement, and disciplinary connections."[59] Varying perspectives and connections with other disciplines are precisely what many teachers strive to see develop within students, helping them to become critical thinkers who can make the connections necessary in order to better understand the curriculum they are dealing with, as well as the world they live in. It is precisely this ability to make connections across disciplines that is expected in Italian high school diploma exams, as examiners push students to demonstrate various levels of understanding that cross various subjects. Thus, an approach to literature that engages students as active learners utilising digital tools and so connects their subject matter across disciplines only helps students to succeed at school in general.

1.4 Shakespeare and the ESL Classroom

In the particular case of countries like Italy, there is the added complexity of teaching English second language learners. These students are still working at improving their language skills and may have a lot of work to do before reaching proficiency in English. This only makes the job of teaching Shakespeare harder, as its language is difficult even for those with an excellent command of English. Many question why we even attempt to teach literature as difficult as Shakespeare to these students, as it could compound problems that already exist in the task of teaching English. Some ask, "does bardolatry lead to unrealistic and outdated

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[59] P. Svensson, "Introducing the Digital Humanities."

expectations?"[60] We are then led to ponder whether Shakespeare really can be successfully taught to English second language learners, or whether we are instead pushing them away from learning the subject all together by having excessively high expectations. As one ESL teacher said, "[y]ou've got half the class who are struggling with literacy as it is, so the idea of introducing them to what is a language that is difficult is just going to alienate them further; it's rather stupid."[61] In fact it is precisely this dual challenge of having to focus on both the actual words in a foreign language as well as the deeper meaning of the text, that is so onerous.[62] At the same time, if successful, the teaching of a Shakespearean play to English second language learners could empower them by the very accomplishment of acquiring even a small part of such a sophisticated text. It can offer a "real and valuable experience with the English language."[63] In fact, it may be that excluding literature from the ESL classroom because the teacher believes it is simply too hard for the students deprives students from having "a deeper, more authentic experience of important aspects"[64] of English language and culture.

While Shakespeare is stimulating for everyone, the problem remains of how to give these students what they need in order to navigate within the text without being drowned by it. As one student said to his teacher when studying *King Lear*, "When you ask questions, Miss, I have all these thoughts, and … I would like to

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[60] D.M. Colarusso, "Rhyme and Reason: Shakespeare's Exceptional Status and Role in Canadian Education," p. 230.

[61] D.M. Colarusso, "Teaching English in the Global Age: Cultural Conversations," PhD Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2009, pp. 130-131.

[62] P. Carroli, *Literature in Second Language Education*, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008, p. 21.

[63] C. Porter, "Words, Words, Words: Reading Shakespeare with English Language Learners," *The English Journal*, Sep., Vol. 99, No. 1 (2009), p. 44.

[64] P. Carroli, *Literature in Second Language Education*, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008, p. 94.

tell you, but I can't – I can't tell you in English."[65] These students are no less interested than English mother-tongue students; they are every bit as stimulated but need to be carefully considered as our readers when preparing to teach them. This particular group of students could actually offer a keener eye when studying Shakespeare, as they are used to attending to the details of the English language.[66] They can therefore be seen as students providing greater potential for understanding, as mother-tongue students can tend to rush through the language taking much too much for granted.

ESL learners of Shakespeare can be found in countries where the first language is not English, yet they can also be found within English mother-tongue dominate classrooms, from Canada to England, and South Africa to Australia. The attention to such diversities in linguistic backgrounds to be found among students at any level, around the world, is justifiably needed. If teachers are to consider the needs of all their students, then whether they have 99 percent of students whose second language is English or merely 1 percent is not particularly relevant. In any case, the ESL literature learner must be taken into consideration. These students are in fact in a position of enhanced learning, as they stand to gain not only from the acquirement of knowledge in the literature sphere, but also the potentized and inevitable improvements in English language acquisition. This is nothing new, as Povey stated in 1972: "literature will increase all language skills because literature will extend linguistic knowledge by giving evidence of extensive and subtle vocabulary usage, and complex and exact syntax."[67]

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[65] D.M. Colarusso, "Teaching English in the Global Age: Cultural Conversations," PhD Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2009, pp. 130-131.
[66] C. Porter, "Words, Words, Words: Reading Shakespeare with English Language Learners," p. 44.
[67] J. Povey, "Literature in TESL Programs: The Language and the Culture," *Teaching English as a Second Language*, edited by H. Aleen and R. Campbell, 1972.

Moreover, ESL students can bridge cultural gaps by accumulating knowledge about peoples and customs currently unreachable due to travel restrictions. When one cannot physically travel, the possibility of travelling in your mind through the literature you are reading and experiencing becomes even more precious. This concept of literature as cultural enrichment has emerged as the dominant reason for the study of literary texts in the late 20th century, and persists today.[68] Literature is currently considered to be both specific and universal, as well as being both individual and collective.[69] A student should be able to improve their language while also experiencing cultural enrichment. In this optic, literature once again becomes a topic and resource to be applied with the communicative approach, and thus a tool for personal and language development. Language acquisition expert Krashen describes literature as simply an instrument for learning a language.[70]

The idea of bridging gaps in cultural understanding is also considered a benefit of teaching literature in ESL classrooms since the study of a literary text provokes subjective experiences, and interaction between students is promoted. Students will present their interpretations and thus inevitably engage in discourse with their counterparts, stimulating oral practice of the language as a secondary benefit to the study of the text in question. Moreover, there is also the opportunity for personal growth as a reader may "discover their thoughts, feelings, [and] customs,"[71] ideas which may have remained dormant had it not been for the opportunity provided through the text, and so be confronted with the likes of oneself.

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[68] P. Carroli, *Literature in Second Language Education*, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008, p. 7.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid, at 9.
[71] Parkinson and Thomas. *Teaching Literature in a Second Language*, Edinburgh University Press, 2010, p. 10.

Literature is also considered useful in language learning because it is genuine and non-trivial,[72] so students are put in direct contact with real language, which is inherently considered important as opposed to other pieces of language taken from a myriad of random sources. Literature is thus considered authentic, offering "genuine samples of a very wide range of styles, registers and text-types at many levels of difficulty."[73] In terms of these levels, there is a wide range within literature depending on the time period, the subject matter, and the style. It certainly does provide a unique opportunity for English students who have reached a high level of proficiency but still wish to grow. Some argue that there is plenty of non-literature material to choose from, yet "at a certain point, learners come to the 'end of language', and […] the only way to keep stretching them, […] is by asking difficult questions about Shakespeare."[74]

The value in teaching literature to ESL students may thus be considered in the interchange between aesthetic, language and cultural features and values provided through the texts,[75] certainly no small feat to put into practice. Teaching Shakespeare to English second language learners can thus be understood as a very demanding but enriching experience, that relies on the teachers' ability to weave together not only various approaches, but more than one goal, allowing all the time for the personal development of the student on more than one level. The potential for classroom growth could be immense. The ESL literature learner not only has a great deal to gain, but their fresh and perhaps culturally diverse viewpoints may

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[72] Ibid, at page 9.
[73] A. Duff and A. Maley, *Literature*, Oxford University Press, 1978.
[74] Parkinson and Thomas. *Teaching Literature in a Second Language*, p. 10.
[75] P. Carroli, *Literature in Second Language Education*, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008, p.18.

enrich the experience for the other students, as well as the teacher, opening new avenues in the path of learning.

Chapter 2

Implications for the high school classroom

2.1 Introduction

The challenge that remains is literally how to teach Shakespeare, an act which ought to include: creating a personal, experiential space between the student and the work, linking issues from the text to the lives of students, conveying meaning and building language skills, even for ESL learners, reaching across disciplines and interlacing digital approaches in order to build the students' independent learning and critical thinking skills, while all the while sparking passion and recognition for the masterpiece canon that it is. This is no small feat for a teacher, and failure in execution can result in a loss of interest on a pupil's part for the rest of their life, an unfortunately common event.

The following will seek to address this challenge by attempting to develop an approach to teaching Shakespeare that is by nature free from imposition of one particular literary theory, allowing for an English literature curriculum that is flexible, where the teacher may adapt it to the needs as well as the capabilities and interests of their students. In this optic, literature should not be limited to the role of a tool, but instead as a means to an end as well as a base in which to root one's learning development, whether that be social, cultural, linguistic, artistic, or digital. The focus shall be on creating authentic and subjective experiences with the text, allowing students to actively participate in the exploration of Shakespearean plays through various digital mediums we have readily available, as well as in the re-enactment of pieces of text in order to give students the possibility of negotiating

the language and creating a personal experience with the text that can spark a future interest in the play, Shakespeare, theatre, or perhaps all of the above.

The approach to teaching Shakespeare must necessarily contemplate the preparation and skills necessary to teachers, recognising their fundamental, powerful yet fragile role in students' learning. The focus in this case ought to be on the teaching of digital abilities which enable students, with the goal of creating independent and empowered learners. We are currently in the 4th industrial revolution[76] where digital technology is widespread and affects all aspects of one's life. The school system is thus considered to play a part in the digital education of today's youth, as preparation which would serve them for the rest of their lives. The point is thus that not only are digital tools useful in order to teach various subjects at school, including literature, but that a parallel but no lesser objective is actually teaching students how to navigate through and be at ease with the digital medium.[77]

This should be of particular interest to schools, since the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development claims that the school systems in Europe are still lagging behind in use of digital technology.[78] Thus, school systems need to adapt to the current world's need for educating youth to be able to function in a technology-driven world. One of the ways the school system can accomplish this is by integrating the teaching of digital skills into the various subjects. English language and literature classes would lend themselves very well to the use of such

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[76] The 4th Industrial Revolution is a term coined by Schwab in 2016. See: K. Schwab, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution.*
[77] Commissione Europea/EACEA/Eurydice. *L'educazione Digitale a Scuola in Europa*, Ufficio delle pubblicazioni dell'Unione europea, 2019, p. 27.
[78] OCSE, *Innovazione Nell'istruzione e Istruire All'innovazione. Il Potere Dell Tecnologie e Delle Competenze Digitali*, 2016, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264265097-en. Accessed 28 Nov. 2021.

skills. Shakespeare could presently boast a vast array of rich resources developed within digital mediums. Students need to know how to access and use them, and by consequence so do their teachers, who must integrate these abilities and resources when teaching Shakespeare. Therefore, if we are ever to reach the goal of digital competency for youth, we first ought to focus on preparing the teachers who should then in turn prepare the students. The possibilities for digitalisation shall be laid out as classroom practices are proposed.

Within the development of a practical approach to the teaching of Shakespeare's works, tailoring will occur in order to consider the needs of ESL learners. Careful adjustments must be made in order to maintain student involvement and motivation, as well as maximize the benefits both to those students as well as the native English ones. With the attainment of a healthy balance, personal and class results will likely improve. These adjustments require the teacher to assume various points of departure when selecting teaching methods and materials and executing the lessons. Material should be chosen from various countries and cultures, as well as from professional and amateur sources, providing students with a range of possible interpretations of the text. This will serve to avoid students being intimidated by the text, as well as legitimise original interpretations. Getting students to produce their own versions of the text through role playing is the goal. The creation of such will result in authentic experiences with the language, the play and their companions, as well as serve as memorable moments capable of sparking an interest to delve deeper into Shakespeare's plays.

Interestingly, when keeping these inter-related aspects in mind, the goals and benefits of the students and the teachers converge, that is to bring individuals as close as possible to the texts in question, building rich subjective spaces that

allow for personal growth as well as literary appreciation. Within this optic, all components of the class truly become a team, reaping benefits from the process both on an individual as well as a community level. Passing from theory to practice, the following shall now explore concrete classroom approaches to teaching Shakespeare.

2.2 Putting theory into practice

A teacher's mere announcement of impending lessons on Shakespeare can provoke sighs of resignation and pangs of anxiety among high school students. The works are so famous, yet often seem so out of reach to youth, particularly so for English language learners. The lack of interest in Shakespeare has historically been linked to the inability to apply "proper methods of instruction."[79] More than one hundred years ago teachers struggled to teach Shakespeare, falling into the trap of focussing on philology or linguistics, or simply overloading students with minute details on history, criticisms, origins of the plots, and the author's life.[80] To this dated dilemma, one teacher's appeal was simply "less method, less teaching, and more Shakespeare."[81] The problem of how to teach Shakespeare was thus present at the outset, and teachers have continually struggled to find an approach that is effective.

The needs of students today are however quite distinct. Contemporary students are struggling with a digitalised world, which due to the current pandemic also requires digital, online education. These students have been in social isolation

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[79] C.L. Maxcy, "Teaching Shakespeare," p. 105.
[80] Ibid, at 106.
[81] E.M. Tappan, "On Teaching Shakespeare," pp. 334–335.

for over two years, and have thus suffered sociological and psychological consequences we have yet to fully understand. These conditions need to be kept in mind. There is no magical formula that allows teachers to successfully transmit understanding and passion for Shakespeare, but one aspect that comes through the reading of teachers' analyses over the past 150 years and which is still relevant, is that students need to make the plays theirs, that is, they need to think subjectively and act them out.[82] This specific aspect is currently more relevant than ever. For students who rarely have an opportunity to have an exchange with each other, interactive experiences with the text, carried out with classmates through authentic and creative tasks is now to be considered absolutely necessary. We have the luxury of applying a wide range of digital tools and mediums to carry out such tasks, and more importantly these allow us to share our interpretations with the class whether we are physically present in class or online. This is an advantage available to us now that can help us mitigate the abovementioned damage provoked by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Bringing a student to a point where they can think subjectively and make discoveries within the text independently is no easy endeavour, but it is one worth striving for. Students need to make their own path in comprehension and application, and thus teachers should limit themselves to acting as guides along the way. Only in this way can students come to feel that they too share Shakespeare, and might continue to explore it in the years after school. Teachers can start this process by asking the students questions. Questions can stimulate subjective

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[82] Such advice is repeatedly stated in: A.F. Blaisdell, "Hints on Teaching Shakespeare," pp. 237-240; C.L. Maxcy, "Teaching Shakespeare," pp.105-108; E.M. Tappan, "On Teaching Shakespeare," pp. 334–335; Ely, Grace D. "Teaching Shakespeare." *American Annals of the Deaf*, vol. 66, no. 5, 1921, pp. 437–39; C.M. Gibson, "On Teaching Shakespeare." *The English Journal*, vol. 31, no. 7, 1942, pp. 548–551.

thought and peak interest, because they ultimately open the door to any kind of answer. Different points of view lead to discussion, and the wish to put forward a clear argument and sway the other side pushes the student to reflect on the substance and form of their words, thereby creating growth on various levels. Knowing how to ask questions in order to stimulate such discussion is not simple, but with practice any teacher can improve. Firstly, it can be useful to provide questions ahead of time, or when a student is stuck not to insist but to come back to them later, having given them time to reflect.[83]   Secondly, the questions should never be of the yes-no kind. Useful questions in this case are ones that allow students to express what they may already know on the topic, or how they interpret a particular character or plot ending. It should be made clear to students that there are no particularly right or wrong answers to the teacher's questions, and that they can in fact be answered by posing questions of their own. If the shift in teaching Shakespeare can truly move from the being teacher-centred to learner-centred, then along the way of discovery teachers must allow students the necessary space to express their opinions on the various aspects, thus exploring the plays and by consequence allowing their own questions to emerge.

2.3 The Value of Performance

The quintessential tool a teacher should employ in the learning process is literally acting out all or parts of the play being studied. It should always be kept in mind when teaching Shakespearean plays that they are meant to be performed, not just read. Although this fact seems self-evident, it has been repeatedly and systematically ignored in classrooms over the years. The English Association

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[83] E.M. Tappan, "On Teaching Shakespeare," p. 334.

pamphlet on "The Teaching of Shakespeare in Schools" from 1908 reminded teachers that "[t]here is a serious danger in the classroom with text books open before us of our forgetting what drama really means."[84] Relevant books to help teachers of today are still repeating these words, insinuating the message needs reiterating. Performance is active, and thus it automatically involves the student, as well as demanding an authentic understanding of the text and so it pushes them further than other methods can. An active method of teaching Shakespeare pushes students to produce critical responses that are inherently personal, and thus doing they become independent learners[85] who are responsible for their presence in the classroom. According to various studies by teachers, playing out Shakespeare "enabled students to make connections between […] characters and modern-day events."[86] Another teacher noted how even her own appreciation for Shakespeare increased when her students became excited about Shakespeare's words while staging a performance.[87]

A starting point for leading a class to performance is to address the play as a script, which stems from a particular genre. Drama inherently sparks ideas connected to action, emotion and experience, to play, experimentation and interpretation. For young learners, it is simply more attractive than announcing the looming study of yet another text. Performance of any measure, whether it be of just a few lines or an entire scene, necessitates classroom interaction, cooperation and oral as well as physical production in English. These activities thus shift the

[84] "The Teaching of English in Schools." *The English Association*, 1908, Leaflet No. 7, p. 2.
[85] R. Gibson, *Teaching Shakespeare,* p. xiii.
[86] G. Eaton, "Circles, Teenagers, and henry V: A Short Shakespeare Residency," *Teaching Artist Journal* 4.4 (2006), p. 241.
[87] S.C. Biondo-Hench, "Shakespeare Troupe: An Adventure in Words, Fluid Text and Comedy," *The English Journal* 99.1 (2009), p. 39.

responsibility wholly to the students, who must put themselves into action if they are to accomplish the task. It is thus suggested that even when needing to read the script, or a part thereof, in class for discovery and comprehension, it is far more engaging for students if they are on their feet, delivering the lines. Even in a class with a large number of students, more attention is paid to the lines, and it becomes far more memorable, to have a few selected students read the lines aloud for the rest of the class standing up. The viewers might become commentators or directors, who aid the teacher in deciphering the script. Although putting on an entire play would be a monumental and phenomenal feat, it could prove more useful and attainable for students to put on performances of short excerpts from the play they are studying.[88] Since it is difficult for students to approach putting a scene into action if the play is unfamiliar, it is recommended that this activity be preceded by ones aimed at viewing all or parts of the play, whether it be in a theatre or in the classroom. It is not unconceivable that students will find the enactment of mini-scenes from a play motivation to read the play in its entirety,[89] thus proving to be excellent stimuli.

If the intent is to produce performances of scenes or pieces thereof in class, teachers must reflect and plan very carefully if they wish to divide the class into groups, prior to the lesson's commencement. This is to avoid wasting time or having to endure and disentangle lively classroom discussions on whom should work with whom. If a teacher wishes to give more responsibility to the class by allowing them to choose their own groups, it could be done as a task for homework before the following lesson. Performance on any level pushes students into the much-desired

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[88] Parkinson and Thomas. *Teaching Literature in a Second Language*, p. 123.
[89] Ibid, at 136.

active role, taking charge of their own learning. Since Shakespeare is considered to belong to all, it is an ideal vehicle to encourage high school students' independent, critical thinking skills, as well as providing the opportunity for comparison among peers, something so essential to development at that age. Students who prepare for performance will have to clarify for themselves the relationships between the characters, but also the intentions behind the lines they read, what they believe to be the best pronunciation or stress for the lines, and how they can use their voices and their bodies to best communicate the meaning to the rest of the class. All of this negotiation process is a golden opportunity for language practice that is authentic and motivated. Teachers must aid students in maintaining the discussions in the English language, as when people invest emotion or opinion in their speech they tend to switch back to their mother-tongue. Teachers can circulate among students to enforce the use of English, as well as aid students in finding compromise.

If group work is totally impeded due to social distancing restrictions in the classroom, as we are sometimes subject to today, the focus could be on the independent student performance of a short soliloquy, thus naturally providing a myriad of interpretations to contemplate upon their viewing. Some students prefer working on their own, however the students would be limited in terms of what they could perform of the text, and they would also be deprived of the myriad of benefits for growth provided through the interaction and development of a scene. A solution could be, weather permitting, that students work outdoors where there are fewer prohibiting regulations regarding interaction and mask-wearing. It is perhaps redundant to say that mask-wearing is highly detrimental to any type of performance or language learning, and should thus be avoided when possible. Under current regulations in Italy, holding classes outdoors allows for freedom of

movement and no mask wearing. Considering the above-mentioned aspects of performance in the classroom, communication emerges as the focus in both the preparatory and the performance stages, bringing such an activity neatly in line with the ultimate goal of language acquisition at any level.

Performance does not necessarily need to be limited to classroom productions, but could also include possibilities like that offered by YouTube. A possible classroom extension could be having students come up with a performance of a scene for the play in question, and uploading it onto YouTube.[90] The use of YouTube videos already available could be a starting point to allow students to independently explore the myriad of amateur performances available online. They could then be used in the classroom to "analyze primary Shakespearean texts – much as we currently use DVDs […] to generate topics for creating and standards for evaluating students' productions."[91] After observation, students could prepare their own renditions for the platform. It is argued that this digital medium would give motivation to the students to work harder on their production knowing that it will be broadcast on YouTube, and so made public and open to peer review. It can also serve as a starting point for discussing interpretation through viewing various interpretations of the text. This video sharing website is an interesting platform because it is a mixture of immediacy of video with the search capabilities and critical distance of a website.[92]

Moreover, when in an online teaching format, students are provided with the possibility of performance otherwise denied them by lack of a physical

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[90] Even *Folger Shakespeare Library* has a YouTube channel which teachers may use in the classroom.
[91] C. Desmet, "Teaching Shakespeare with YouTube," *The English Journal*, vol. 99, no. 1, 2009, pp. 65–70, http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/40503329.pdf?loggedin=true, p. 65.
[92] Ibid, at 66.

classroom presence. Given our current situation where students are continually thrown into online learning for short periods of time, this medium can mitigate the jarring experience and allows students at home the possibility of participating as fully as if they were physically in class. Moreover, we are now experiencing the newer phenomenon of high-flex classrooms where some students may be at home while others are in class. Although this is generally a negative experience for students, as they are unsettled and feel excluded from the classroom, a positive opportunity could be seen in that students at home can proceed with the production of a piece of text using YouTube, while the others continue with an in-class performance. In the end, these two types of performances can be presented and compared, giving students the opportunity to evaluate the pros and cons of each medium. It also gives them the possibility of observing the differences in experience for the viewer. Thus, a teacher can turn an unfortunate situation of class division into an opportunity for sharing and discussion, incorporating more mediums and forms of delivery.

Moreover, if the class is being carried out partially or completely online, some platforms allow for breakout rooms where students can work online together and thus have the opportunity to build something as a team despite being physically distant. Working on a script through a screen would actually provide some benefits if the final objective is to produce an online video format, as the delivery of lines could be tested in the medium that will eventually be used. Students should be given the freedom to adapt the text to suit that medium, creating their own interpretation of the text. There are many positive aspects that can be identified, one of the most powerful of which is empowerment given to students knowing that they too can

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contribute in a notable way to the interpretations of Shakespeare, helping his works to carry on in the present day.

Not only is putting scenes into action by students clearly useful: viewing performances has also been proven beneficial. Treating Shakespeare as it should be treated, that is, as drama, increases its resonance for students.[93] Therefore trips to the theatre, and when this is not possible, also viewing of theatre or film versions should be encouraged. Although there is the concern for variants in interpretation and thus divergence from the source text in particular with films, this should be embraced as part of what drama is – a mutable, interpretative performance. It is thus a feature of the art form. As already discussed, it is also arguably a feature of literary works in general to be subject to choice and change,[94] and this fact should not cause concern. According to some studies, high school students' test scores were consistently higher when students viewed a performance rather than read the play.[95] These scores reflected a better understanding of the play, and as added value students all said they enjoyed the experience of Shakespearean drama much more.[96] Therefore it is highly recommended to include viewing performance as part of the teaching method, creating opportunities for students to experience interpretation of the plays.

Such performances should not be limited to blockbuster film versions, or professional dramatic performances from the English world. In order to weave the threads between individuals and the plays, teachers should recognize and expose

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[93] D.M. Colarusso, "Rhyme and Reason: Shakespeare's Exceptional Status and Role in Canadian Education," p. 234.

[94] Ibid at 232.

[95] Julie Gorlewski and Brandon Shoemaker, "Research for the Classroom: To Read or Not to Read: Five Approaches to Teaching Shakespeare," *The English Journal*, March, Vol. 102, No. 4 (2013), p. 113.

[96] Ibid.

their students to the multitude of mediums which have been utilised to produce performances of Shakespeare's work. Teachers can start with an audio performance, tapping into the plethora of performances available online in audio file format. BBC has made such recordings available for decades[97]: they are easy for anyone to access. Closing one's eyes, and listening to interpretations of Hamlet's famous soliloquy by various actors, for example, can stimulate the student's language and content comprehension, and the sheer variety can provoke a subtler analysis of the text. Moreover, a voice makes the experience more personal, and the inclusion of various isolated senses helps to instil the text in one's memory. I believe giving students the opportunity of preparing voice recordings to be shared with the class to be an excellent opportunity. One only needs a simple mobile phone to record one's voice, and the file could be shared with the class whether they are in presence or online. This type of exercise is easy to carry out when students are in a period of online classes, but it also provides infinite possibilities for working on various language skills. For example, students could all be given the same soliloquy or monologue, or a piece of such if their level of English is below upper-intermediate. When given, students could also be assigned a particular emotion, whether it be jealousy, sadness, frustration, joy. This would provide the opportunity to discuss reception, word stress, pronunciation, the use of pauses and changes in volume and so forth. It would likely lead to discussions related to the true intent of Shakespeare, and the best rendition for our current world. This would in no way be hindered by being online. Thus, Shakespeare taught from

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[97] For radio and TV versions of Shakespearean performances from the UK see
https://www.bbc.com/mediacentre/search/?tag=BBC_Archive.

this perspective could help us explore digital mediums, expand on language skills, explore the text and increase participation despite possible online classes.

Next, teachers should select performances for viewing in the classroom, taking into consideration productions coming from all corners of the world. A myriad of multicultural performances exists, helping to "transcend the myth of monolithic textual authority/authorship"[98] and bringing Shakespeare closer to home. Part of the issue with students is born from him being a white western male from centuries ago. How can a student living, in say, modern day Vietnam relate to his works without being affected by this difference in contexts? By experiencing Shakespeare as interpreted by culturally similar performers, ESL students might be more apt to forge a connection to the play in question, and discussion may thus be more easily sparked in the classroom. Moreover, if the form of the play is more familiar, students do not have to focus on intense learning on two levels. Students can thus concentrate on the text itself, rather than on trying to understand the culturally estranged context.

2.4 Content Familiarity and Language Learning

If we are to accept that literature is in and of itself a kind of space between cultures, we inevitably accept that it is also necessarily bound to language. Language learning is part and parcel with literature. The use of literature in the English language classroom is important for teachers trying to avoid presenting students with inappropriate types of language: language which is repetitive and of only one type, language that is not truly authentic or simplifies or stereotypes the

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[98] E.G. Jones, "Global Performance and Local Reception: Teaching Hamlet and More in Singapore." *Teaching Social Justice Through Shakespeare*, 2019, p. 59.

vision of a culture.[99] The very fact that the author wished to write what they did attests to its real importance.[100] Personal reaction from a reader or viewer is thus likely with a literary text, which by its very nature feels genuine. If one contemplates a typical dialogue or article extract in an English language learning textbook the difference is astonishing. It is highly unlikely that students will express any interest at all in the latter, let alone provoke personal opinions or feelings on the matters addressed. Literature is then quintessentially real language. It is authentic, as well as coming from an infinitely wide range of styles and presenting varied levels of difficulty.[101] Thus, it intermingles with the teaching of language, and is by consequence infinitely useful to take into consideration key recommendations coming from experts on language acquisition.

The first consideration comes from language learning in an ESL classroom that employs CLIL.[102] The founders of this approach, which foresees teaching a school subject in a foreign language, sustain that it is undesirable to present ESL students with both difficult content and difficult language at the same time. Approaches in CLIL foresee teaching on two levels: content and also language, where traditionally content is considered the priority.[103] Within this realm, the content cognitive demand (CCD) and the language cognitive demand (LCD) should remain balanced. This means that the content and language introduced in a classroom lesson should not both be new for the students, that is, they should not be a great challenge for the students at the same time. For example, familiar

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[99] P. Carroli, *Literature in Second Language Education*. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008, p.184.
[100] Parkinson and Thomas. *Teaching Literature in a Second Language,* p. 10.
[101] Ibid.
[102] The acronym stands for: *Content and Language Integrated Learning*. It foresees the teaching of a school subject in a foreign language. Literature is not the most common choice for CLIL in Italian schools, but it is every bit as valid of a choice as science or art.
[103] P.E. Balboni, *Le Sfide Di Balboni*, UTET Università, 2015, p. 215.

grammar and vocabulary should be used when introducing new content, and instead during a session of content review a teacher could introduce new language. It would thus logically follow that when introducing a Shakespearean play, the content should be made familiar before introducing new language, because if the student is presented with two great challenges, they will likely shut down their learning process.

This negative reaction by an ESL student was described by the linguist Stephen Krashen as the affective filter.[104] It follows that low self-esteem or anxiety cause the affective filter of the student to rise, inhibiting their ability to learn. It is thus commendable for teachers to take the necessary time to prepare balanced lessons that take into consideration the complexity of the literature for ESL learners, and attempt to present tasks that have but one aspect of difficulty at a time. Shakespeare's language is by no means simple for anyone today, and for ESL learners it can be more than overwhelming. If we can remove the difficulty on the level of cultural content, making the actual events in the plays and the behaviour of the characters more comprehensible it is to be applauded, so that students can then focus their efforts on language comprehension and acquisition. It is suggested that one way to do this is to embrace multi-cultural interpretations of Shakespearean plays, in the hopes of relaxing ESL students and thus helping them to approach the language with an open, positive mind-frame.

According to Krashen, it is best to focus on the content, because the language acquisition will then follow naturally. This concept is called the rule of

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[104] S.D. Krashen, *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*, University of Southern California, 2009, p. 30.

forgetting.[105] Although this is whole-heartedly accepted when contemplating, for example, CLIL science classes in an elementary school, where students evidently forget they are learning English while focusing instead on the ecosystem they are exploring, we do not necessarily want the same result in a high school class on Shakespeare. We do not want the students to forget about the language, but instead we want them not to be overburdened by the diversity in cultural content in order to be able to experience and acquire Shakespearean language. Thus, the suggestion is not to choose to focus on either content or language, but simply to give them each their just time in class, avoiding the simultaneous teaching of both. Moreover, if the cultural context and some content is understood prior to diving into the language itself, then the students can better understand what is being said in the play. That is, the input will then become more comprehensible, and comprehensible input is the key to language acquisition.[106] Therefore, if we focus on making the plays comprehensible, starting with cultural comprehension and then language comprehension, students will by consequence acquire language skills. Thus, teachers should introduce viewing of the play in a culturally similar version, coming perhaps from their country and preferably their generation. This will help the students familiarize themselves with the play, dissipate anxiety from the linguistically difficult expectations, and stimulate interest to further explore the play in question.

2.5 Acceptable Re-interpretation of the Text

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[105] P.E. Balboni, *Le Sfide Di Balboni,* p. 214.
[106] Krashen affirms that comprehensible input is the key to language acquisition, and the focus must be on what is being said, not on how it is being said. See: S.D. Krashen, *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*, p. 62 for details on productive input.

Benefits are to be obtained for mother-tongue English students through the viewing of multi-cultural interpretations of Shakespearean plays, also because it could open up interesting spaces in the classroom for discussing the deconstruction of pre-conceived notions, as well as the true universality of the Bard's work. Such resources are widely available, the most notable of which is MIT's Global Shakespeares archive,[107] where a teacher can find performances in 44 different languages, of 35 plays coming from 60 countries. Emily Griffiths Jones, teacher and scholar, suggests allowing students to explore this digital tool prior to being presented with the actual play, in order to have them firstly experience a performance rather than read a script, and secondly to immediately break pre-conceived notions on the playwright.[108] While this idea was presented within the frame of ESL students in an Eastern country, I would argue that equal benefit could be proven through this approach for native English students, who may in fact need the surprising input in order to grab their attention and introduce new interpretations on dated conceptions of the plays. It is to be kept in mind, that if Shakespeare is truly suitable for all English literature classrooms, then his works must remain open to interpretation and adaptation, whether professional or amateur, in English or any other language, in England or elsewhere in our interconnected world. This applies to students of Shakespeare as well. Thus, the viewing of various styles of interpretation and lowering the cultural and plot comprehension difficulties should be considered a first step for teachers.

Certainly, the de-construction of ethno-culturally rooted interpretations of canonical classics is something which many University departments strive for.

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[107] For access to the archives, see: https://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/.
[108] E.G. Jones, "Global Performance and Local Reception: Teaching Hamlet and More in Singapore," pp. 55–64.

However, it is traditionally dealt with through the written medium, by introducing re-writings, not alternative performances. For example, in a university course entitled Critical and Didactic Approaches at the University of Padua one professor dealt with difficult questions regarding racism and ethnophobia present in a canonical Victorian work by juxtaposing it with a more modern novel's interpretation of some of the characters.[109] It is precisely in this questioning of racial, gender or political givens present in texts like Shakespeare that students can become engaged, stirring passion for what is identified as unjust according to one's current standards. Such interweaving, allowing space for reworkings that are more culturally acceptable to students, provides an opportunity for them to express their frustrations with texts that may seem outdated while being able to better place the identified contradictions within the limits of their time, thus coming to peace with morally difficult conflicts in the text. It is thus argued that classes can benefit from being presented various re-writings in the form of performances in order to deepen their level of engagement.

Regarding Shakespeare, the act of rewriting the text has become quite an established practice. In 1976, Arnold Wesker rewrote the Jewish character of Shylock from the *Merchant of Venice.*[110] This character has been one of the most hotly debated Shakespearean characters, as the original portrayal is blatantly anti-Semitic from a post-WWII perspective. In Wesker's rendition, Shylock becomes a well-rounded, humane and cultured man of the Renaissance. This type of counter-discourse inevitably puts the applicability of Shakespeare to our current day in

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[109] In this particular course, the professor dealt with diversified racial and cultural profiling of female characters in *Jane Eyre* by presenting the rewriting of Bertha in *Wide Sargasso Sea,* a novel which emerged more than one hundred years later.

[110] A. Wesker, *The Merchant*, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 1976.

question, but has not resulted in its demise. Shakespeare persists in literature classes, and so the presentation of counter-discourses can provide teachers and students with material that responds to their culturally-rooted morality and thus assists them in comprehending and contextualising the original. Again, the suggestion is to present more than one version of the play in order to increase student involvement. However, with Shakespeare it would be more appropriate to present a different performance, alternative to the classic interpretation, remaining true to the genre: drama. Thus, teachers should focus on showing alternative performances, at the beginning of the programme.

After having viewed performances, teachers may select other texts to accompany Shakespeare. This is in fact a useful tool often used in the classroom. Some teachers select other pieces of literature that could help students draw easier lines of relatedness. Given the fact that Shakespearean plays are many centuries old, other short pieces of contemporary texts could be infinitely useful to study in parallel, so that students might connect more easily to the original piece, as well as see how universal and timeless Shakespeare really is. One Italian literature teacher sustains that similarly, "by reading Benni's 'The Three Tales of the Traveller', one can incidentally find the resonance and universality of the structure and essence of Dante's *Divine Comedy*."[111] Thus, a text need not stand alone, but can be effectively paired with other pieces of recent literature that provide a great number of benefits to students. While a piece of a comparative text is recommended, it should be given an appropriate amount of time in class, that is substantially less than the principal text. The secondary text is meant to highlight and clarify the primary one.

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[111] P. Carroli, *Literature in Second Language Education*, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008, p. 184.

Apart from the previously-mentioned selection of texts to respond to culturally difficult questions, teachers can contemplate using secondary texts in order to help students, whether native English speakers or not, with language comprehension. In practice, the teacher must attain a delicate balance between drawing and maintaining the interest of students through digestible pieces of the text, while making sure not to betray the original work with oversimplifications and extrapolations that deviate too widely from the its original state. The latter is a trap that is very easy to fall into, as teachers often translate or dumb-down the language so students quickly understand. One method is to supply bridge texts, that is books with similar themes and characters to those of Shakespeare, but which have more accessible language and are considered more engaging.[112] These texts take these Shakespearean elements and place them in different contexts in order to produce exciting effects for the readers. In the case of *Macbeth*, there is Cooney's *Enter three Witches*,[113] where a story is told from the point of view of a teenage girl who is trapped living in the castle with the terrible Macbeths. Although this text should "encourage them to pick up and get to know the source material,"[114] it is also possible that it could result in never reading or appreciating the source at all. Moreover, teachers should be wary of presenting students with a spin-off which could never contend with the original, since the act of introducing it in itself insinuates it is a companion of equal value, something quite dangerous to suggest. Thus, bridge texts are to be avoided, apart from in a post-script context, that is as summer holiday reading after having concluded the lessons on the original. In this

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[112] M. Letcher, "Off the Shelves: Old Tales Made New Again: Shakespeare's Place in Young Adult Literature," *The English Journal*, May, Vol. 101, No. 5 (2012), p. 88.
[113] C.B. Cooney, *Enter Three Witches*, (New York: Scholastic Paperbacks, 2008).
[114] M. Letcher, "Off the Shelves: Old Tales Made New Again: Shakespeare's Place in Young Adult Literature," p. 89.

way the additional texts become spaces of reflection and can serve to deepen a youth's interest in the themes, symbols, characters, and language of the bridge and by consequence the original text.

Another lingering approach to reading the text is effectively a relic of New Criticism, a method dating back almost a century. The approach of close readings is an element of New Criticism that "relies on close readings of the texts and in-depth analysis."[115] Even if many other literary theories have come to the forefront over the last seventy years, there is a hesitancy to let go of close readings in classrooms.[116] Although this might seem appealing to purists, the reality of such an approach is often incredibly boring, and according to some teachers, the reaction is so negative that students "reject Shakespeare altogether."[117] This method can tend to risk a perception of remoteness, where learners have difficulty in relating, whether it be geographically, historically or socially to what is going on in the text.[118] Besides being dull, English second language readers may find such a study overwhelmingly difficult, and the pace of the classes would slow to a near standstill as teachers attempt to grind through the text. It is thus to be avoided altogether.

A common solution for teachers attempting to avoid overwhelming students with language difficulties is providing a parallel text like the *No Fear Shakespeare* editions made by *Sparknotes*,[119] which provide the original with a contemporary

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[115] Gorlewski and Shoemaker, "Research for the Classroom: To Read or Not to Read: Five Approaches to Teaching Shakespeare," p. 111.
[116] Parkinson and Thomas. *Teaching Literature in a Second Language,* p. 19.
[117] Gorlewski and Shoemaker, "Research for the Classroom: To Read or Not to Read: Five Approaches to Teaching Shakespeare," p. 111.
[118] Parkinson and Thomas. *Teaching Literature in a Second Language,* p. 11.
[119] See: https://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare for a list of *No Fear Shakespeare* products and descriptions.

English translation, side-by-side.[120] Although this would certainly alleviate stress on the part of the student, the likelihood of it falling to a similar fate of bridge texts is great. Students would simply read the translation, and not the original. Some proponents of this method admit that in order to successfully use these texts, "teacher guidance throughout the reading in order to maintain focus on the original language"[121] is of the utmost importance. The solution to this conundrum could be to approach abridged versions of the text,[122] a method supported by the *Folger Shakespeare Library*.[123] Not to be confused with the previously mentioned bridge texts, abridged texts are original texts that have been cut in order to give the reader a shorter version. They are not, however, manipulated or changed as bridge texts are. These versions are simply shorter, in the case of Shakespeare's abridged plays they are on average about 30 pages. Since the length is more manageable for high school students, these versions provide classes with more opportunity to read the entire play, without being overwhelming. Students can still get a good sense of Shakespeare's language, and the structure of his plays, and can feel a rewarding sense of accomplishment at being able to complete the reading. After an introduction through viewings, teachers should use abridged texts to execute readings of the script. These readings can be small excerpts of the entire play, depending on the level of the students.

Many choose to insert the study of Shakespeare "within the broader interdisciplinary context of cultural studies."[124] It is argued that approaches

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[120] Caitlan Franco and Joseph R. Scotese, "What Value Do Side-by-Side or Parallel-Text Editions Such as *No Fear Shakespeare* or *Shakespeare Made Easy* Have in the Classroom" *The English Journal*, vol. 99 no. 1, 2009.
[121] Ibid.
[122] For examples of abridged versions, see: http://shakespeare.mit.edu/index.html.
[123] See: https://www.folger.edu.
[124] Parkinson and Thomas. *Teaching Literature in a Second Language,* p. 21.

stemming from this field, where there is a link to sociological theory or focus on particular social themes that then carry the teaching into other realms like prison life and detainees for example,[125] can be very positive in that they widen a youth's perspective and cause them to think critically and make connections between literature and the real world. By doing so, they inherently validate Shakespeare's presence in the classroom as being useful to engage students in some of their society's more hidden problems. The danger, however, remains that such liaisons and activities could deviate too far from the original text itself and so the students focus on the connection made and the other application, rather than on the piece of literature. A compromise could be that first the text is studied, and then it is integrated into other fields, even in other subjects' classrooms. It is thus a broadening mechanism that can be applied when the text has already been studied.

2.6 Preparing teachers for digitalised classrooms

There are so many skills that might be defined as useful for teachers to perform well in the classroom. Most do not instil fear, but peak teachers' interest at the idea of improving their efficacy in the classroom through slight adjustments in approach. Yet, a different discourse concerns digital skills. Implementing the digital in classrooms whether in online teaching or not tends to stress teachers who already feel overburdened by the demands placed upon them due to complex curricula and classes with what seems like an endless number of children and youth in them. Part of the problem is that for decades digital skills were not part of a teacher's

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[125] J.M. Yeo, "Teaching Shakespeare Inside Out: Creating a Dialogue Between Traditional and Incarcerated Students," in *Teaching Social Justice Through Shakespeare: Why Renaissance Literature Matters Now,* eds. Hillary Eklund and Wendy Beth Hyman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

preparation. It is thus a common situation that teachers are presented with demands to integrate the digital while they are already working. What this really means is having to confront learning a large amount of new skills when you have no time to actually do so, because well, you are busy teaching. One professor points out that creating and using "technology-based learning activities in school can be likened to learning to fly an airplane while it's being built."[126] The analogy is that one could get lost in attempting to learn to effectively use these tools, completely forgetting the destination they wish to reach, that is to impart learning. It can also simply require too much time, something which teachers simply do not have in abundance. Therefore, the danger is that it is easier to just continue with the methods you know, rather than burden yourself with learning to use new technologies in the classroom.

This is clearly a hindrance to our development and leaves one with a sense of frustration. The frameworks of reference for approximately two thirds of European education systems include digital skills as being among the most essential for teachers. Some countries list these skills in their specifics and make them obligatory for teachers to learn, while others merely list them in a general manner, without any particular obligation. In the case of Italy, the educational framework advises that digital skills be acquired, but without any specific reference to the type.[127] They are usually listed as general competencies for pedagogical use, such as using digital technology like multimedia, tools and materials. Regardless of the verbiage used, the goal listed is to have teachers who are able to create a learning environment where digital technology is part of their teaching practices.[128] Interestingly, the

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[126] J.K. Chisholm, "Pleasure and Danger in Online Teaching and Learning," *Academe*, vol. 92, no. 6, 2006, p. 40.

[127] Commissione europea/EACEA/Eurydice. *L'educazione Digitale a Scuola in Europa*, Ufficio delle pubblicazioni dell'Unione europea, 2019, p. 69.

[128] Ibid, at p. 73.

actually teaching of such skills in Italy is foreseen for the period after their initial preparation as teachers.[129] This means that first future teachers do their qualifying education degree, and then are supposed to endeavour into learning digital skills. It is precisely this approach to building digitally competent teachers at a time when they are already working and thus have limited time available to dedicate to such study that is faulty. These should be skills already obtained prior to entering the classroom. This is precisely why many teachers push themselves on for years while employing only the barest of digital skills, never developing their full potential. These teachers are in technological survival mode.

This kind of opting out has however not been possible as of late. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, many teachers have been catapulted into online classes, having to learn overnight how to use various platforms such as Google Education or tools like Zoom to carry out their lessons online. Inevitably, apart from learning how to host a meeting online and control webcams, chats and microphones, one also has to adapt their lessons to suit that medium. It simply does not work to use a lecture style format online with teenagers. Their level of interest quickly feigns and the teacher is left talking to a screen. Thus, the need exists for teachers to become digitally able. As stated, the ideal time for this is not while working as a teacher, but while being trained to be one. In fact, one can see a growing amount of just such content in a variety of University of Padua courses within the degree of European and American Languages and Literature, the degree which typically brings one to teach English and Literature within the Italian school system. At the Masters level, the final two years of the qualifying degree, there are

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[129] Ibid, at 79.

numerous courses which attempt to teach future teachers how to use some digital tools.

For example, in the French Language and Linguistics 1 course almost the entire program focuses on learning to use at least a few digital tools for teaching. Much of the course centres around students understanding, first of all, that digital skills for teaching is something that has been around for quite a while, why it is promoted, and how teachers might develop the necessary abilities. In this particular course held in French, the professor referred to these skills as TICE, that is, ICT for teaching.[130] It was made evident that almost twenty years ago there was already the recognition that teachers needed to be better trained and prepared in digital skills in order to be able to reach the new goals laid out for the students' own digital development. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation had published a piece entitled *Information and communication technology in education: a curriculum for schools and programme of teacher development*[131] back in 2002, which attempted to assist EU Member States in the adoption of various technologies including distance education and online learning. The report had a two-tiered practical function, which was to help schools adopt ICT into their curriculums, and secondly to aid teachers in their digital education so that they are able to reach the first goal. It was repeatedly mentioned how important it is to help teachers build digital confidence,[132] by giving them the opportunity to attend training courses and seminars that aimed at building specific ICT skills. A great

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[130] TICE stands for Technologies de l'information et de la communication pour l'enseignement. ICT stands for Information and Communications Technology.

[131] Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000129538.

[132] Evgueni Khvilon and Mariana Patru, "Information and communication technology in education: a curriculum for schools and programme of teacher development," *UNESCO*, 2002, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000129538, page 49-51.

deal of things has changed over the past twenty years, but the needs listed in this report are as relevant as ever. The above-mentioned university course proceeded to attempt to teach specific mediums, platforms and tools like Wikis, Google Forms and Moodle, all aimed at giving students a base in order to draw from when beginning their careers as teachers. It is worth noting that this course was held completely online, thus reinforcing the fact that it can be very effective to teach digital skills through the online medium.

The same course but for English (English Language and Linguistics 1) spends almost the entire semester teaching students how to use corpora, in order to build digital skills that provide teachers with two opportunities. Corpora are massive digital word banks meant to store as much of a particular type of language as possible. Corpora are searchable and workable tools, where you can explore a particular piece of work, like a Shakespearean play, for a particular use of a term or phrase. This is but one possibility, because one could also use a corpus to search across various works or over a large period of time for particular uses of language. One can place innumerable parameters on their search, making it a highly sophisticated type of tool. The opportunities for teachers of English would be two-fold. Firstly, teachers who are teaching English or English literature can do their own research prior to class to verify how typical the use of a particular term or expression is, both at the time of publication and today. They can also determine the most typical contexts within which a word is used. This can be particularly useful for teachers who are not mother-tongue English speakers and wish to confirm their suspicions and eliminate doubts prior to arriving in class. Secondly, the tool could be presented to students as precisely that – a reliable way for them to research the use of specific terms in English. For Shakespeare this could be particularly

useful, as students could use corpora to find how such a word or phrase is used today.

Thus, courses like the above-mentioned are of infinite value to students preparing to be teachers who perhaps have not had any training whatsoever on how to use digital tools or create didactic materials in that medium. These are just two examples of how to help future teachers acquire the skills they need. It is however suggested that the place of digital skills in a university program which prepares future literature teachers should be well defined and permanent. Specific courses on the digital humanities and the practical tools emerging from the digital medium, as well as their real application in the classroom should be required for attaining this degree. Workshop-style seminars in specific digital skills should be added as part of those offered by a university from which students are obliged to choose a minimum number in order to accumulate the necessary credits to graduate. In the meantime, teachers who are already on the field need to be provided with opportunities outside of class hours to develop their skills and get real practice. The burden cannot fall completely on the shoulders of each teacher, as the goal is a communal one, therefore there needs to be training offered to all in order to get a positive overall result.

At the moment, *G Suite for Education* is the most widely used platform in primary and secondary schools in Italy.[133] It provides various interesting tools to create activities that students can do during the lessons in the classroom or online, or even at home as homework or for working on a project. The quantity and diversity in the tools offered provides teachers with the possibility of creating

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[133] See: https://www.economyup.it/innovazione/il-digitale-per-la-scuola-15-piattaforme-per-la-didattica-a-distanza.

courses that are entirely online with interactive pedagogical activities, thereby generating a complete digitalisation of the academic experience.[134] This should not put teachers off, but on the contrary, it should bring them to realize that the historical period we are living in requires us to welcome digital education and realise this is the right moment to learn and apply these widely available technologies. [135] In this way we can help students not only to learn the subject in question, in our case Shakespeare, but also how to correctly and safely use these technologies themselves, so that they might become significant actors in the digital development.[136]

This would of course again bring students into a more active and independent role, something striven for across the board in education. The creation of activities on digital platforms thus gives students the possibility to take the stage,[137] becoming active and responsible for their own literature and language learning. The engagement with the student is more holistic in this way, since they are solely responsible for the online aspects of the course. On the other end the teacher is easily able to check on the progress of their students as well as their level of participation. The teacher's role in this environment thus becomes that of a creator of activities that puts students at the centre of their own learning process, and so by consequence the teacher becomes a non-invasive guide. This does not

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[134] C. Bedel, "Éducation, Économie et Transition Numérique." *L'Éducation à l'âge Du Numérique*, no. 63, 2015, p. 70.
[135] M.V. Sansberro, "L'utilisation Des TICE Dans La Classe de FLE Pour Communiquer Avec Des Interlocuteurs Francophones," *Alliance Française de Bahia Blanca*, 2016, http://bdigital.uncu.edu.ar/objetos_digitales/9390/17-sansberro-cnpf.pdf, p. 1.
[136] Ibid, at 76.
[137] C. Bedel, "Éducation, Économie et Transition Numérique," p. 74.

lessen their role, but it is a change that a teacher must embrace even if at times it could appear from the outside that they remain at the periphery of the process. [138]

Upon consideration of the various benefits of online activities, it should be quickly recognised that they provide a plethora of opportunities to create authentic experiences with language. Online activities created through platforms like Moodle or Google for Education allow you to incorporate material found on the internet such as video clips, audio clips, images and endless amounts of document types. It is thus easy to provide that authenticity so highly reputed by language learning experts as essential to the process.[139] It is then evident that teachers must be adequately prepared to utilise these digital tools with ease, becoming comfortable with the medium and able to focus not on how to operate or navigate through the various online possibilities, but on what of these is the best choice for the literary topic of the moment. This focus on content can occur only when teachers are at ease with the means.

2.7 Students at the forefront

The main role in the literature classroom must be played by the student. For over fifty years the reading of literature has been defined as an active process in that students should be involved. If this is so, it requires an actor. In this case the actor is necessarily the student, who must attempt to engage with a text, constructing layers of meaning that go far beyond an author's intention, but instead reach towards creating meaning that is purely subjective. Meaning is not simply

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[138] M.A. Medioni, "L'enseignement-Apprentissage Des Langues : Un Agir Ensemble Qui s'affirme." *L'APLV*, 2009, http://www.christianpuren.com/mes-travaux.
[139] P.E. Balboni, *Le Sfide Di Babele: Insegnare Le Lingue Nelle Società Complesse*. Novara, 4° ed, UTET Università, 2020, pp. 47-50.

present within the words on a page.[140] Instead, this idea suggests that readers are actually creating meaning as they read.[141] In fact, the value that literature has is perceived to sit precisely in this space between "the inner experience of the author […] and the sympathetic reception of that expression by the reader."[142] As previously stated, there are multiple layers of meaning that emerge from the subjective experience of the reader, thus confirming that the shift in literary theory that occurred fifty years ago still holds: readers are the focus.[143] Putting the students in that important position is however a delicate process, and the teacher as guide is still critical to the success of the experience.

Starting with the initial approach to Shakespeare, students can be given autonomy and control. When presenting the playwright and the various plays to be explored, the ideal would be to allow students to choose which play to study. Giving students the possibility of choice necessarily pushes them into an active role of discussing and deciding amongst peers. In order to come to a decision, students must look at the various plays, contemplating the themes within them, as well as the settings, and level of difficulty of the text, among other things. The discussion should be held in class, with the teacher presenting the various options through as many mediums as possible. Ideally, the teacher could present, for example, *A Midsummer Night's Dream, Romeo and Juliet,* and *The Tempest* by having students view a few clips from various interpretations, both theatrical and cinematographic, listen to a short reading of a monologue by perhaps a famous actor, and read an

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[140] P. Carroli, *Literature in Second Language Education*. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008, p. 25.
[141] R. Saljo, "Reading and Everyday Conceptions of Knowledge." *The Experience of Learning: Implications for Teaching and Studying in Higher Education*, edited by F. Marton et al., 1997, pp. 89–105.
[142] Parkinson and Thomas. *Teaching Literature in a Second Language,* p. 23.
[143] L.M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1978.

excerpt from the play itself aloud. This would provide an initially free experience with the texts,[144] engaging the students in an almost subconscious way as they would be focused on the concept of choosing the most attractive play according to their mood and interest. Engaging students by giving them some authority over what text they will study will draw them into an authenticating process by which they will be more apt to interact with the text, presenting and defending their interpretations of such. It would also encourage students to want to carry out further investigation of the play in question.[145] The teacher's role in this case would be to carefully select a group of plays to choose from, as well as the method of presentation of these to the class.

Where this is not possible due to rigid curriculum demands, as is often the case in the Italian high school classroom, teachers should opt for allowing students to choose to view the interpretation of the play they wish. For example, students could be directed to an online archive of performances and they could select the one they find most appealing, perhaps giving the students the responsibility of following up with the class, presenting their classmates with a clip from the version they viewed and some of the choices the director made that they found interesting. Another possibility is to give students the choice of studying a particular scene of a play. By presenting various scenes, students could debate the one that is most interesting to them on a cultural, linguistic or theatrical level.

Giving students the possibility to make choices about their education first and foremost communicates the teacher's respect in their regard, as capable

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[144] L.M. Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration* (5th Edition). The Modern Language Association, 1995.
[145] Ibid.

individuals. It therefore has the power to positively contribute to a student's self-esteem.[146] It also automatically shifts responsibility onto the students' shoulders, drawing them to the discussion table and thus acts as a subtle tool of engagement. In this shared learning environment students have been proven more likely to discover "hidden meanings and intercultural links,"[147] because they are exploring what they have chosen to explore, and thus have taken responsibility for both the process and the outcome. The hope is that such involvement will lead to students' being more dedicated to the pursuit of literature, as well as making the experience more memorable. Students would likely make cultural connections to their own lives, because these personal senses of connection are often what pushed one to select a text to read in the first place. From these selections teachers can follow up with the reading of an abridged version and activities to act out what time allows for. Afterwards, teachers can extract ideas for parallel texts from our current day to incorporate into the curriculum, allowing for a deeper analysis of certain aspects of literature. If a class chooses the play they wish to study, they are more likely to actually study it. When it comes to literature in the ESL classroom studies have shown that students were pleased to study literature within their English curriculum if they were included in the selection of texts and in general took part in deciding upon activities to do in class.[148] Responsibility breeds action, and action carries interest, which is precisely what contemporary scholars claim is needed from students if their engagement with literature is to be fruitful and contribute to young individuals becoming avid readers for life

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[146] P. Carroli, *Literature in Second Language Education*. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008, p. 186.

[147] Ibid, at 185.

[148] P. Carroli, *Literature in Second Language Education*. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008, p. 93.

Chapter 3
Case Study

3.1 Introduction

In order to verify the implications drawn from my research, I decided to carry out a case study in a lower-secondary school. The school of reference is a semi-private Salesian middle school in the province of Treviso.[149] I created a Shakespeare project to introduce the third-year students to drama. The idea was to make a break with the traditional program and present students with something completely different in their English programme, and gauge their reactions. There are a total of three classes, each of which receives a total of three hours of English instruction per week. Because the students had varying exposure to English education prior to middle school, their level of language competency varies from an A1.2 to a B1.2 level,[150] that is from a beginner to a lower-mid intermediate level. This provided a very challenging base to deal with, as the classes are far from homogeneous. Moreover, these students had not yet been exposed to any literature. As discussed, Shakespeare would not initially be considered the easiest example of literature to begin with for ESL students. Also for this reason, I did not consider the proposed project a certain success. The three classes shall be referred to as they are at school: 3A, 3B, 3C. The weakest class in terms of language competency, as well as behaviour and class cohesion is 3A, followed by 3B, and 3C. The latter is thus the

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[149] Istituto Salesiani E. di Sardagna, Castello di Godego (TV).
[150] Levels according to the *Common European Framework of References for Languages* (CEFR)**,** available at: https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions.

strongest class and generally found to be the easiest to teach according to the other teachers.

While developing a lesson plan[151] for this project, I had to make some sacrifices. The total amount of time allotted to this project was 5 hours, divided into one-hour blocks, thus occurring over the period of a month. Due to this restriction, especially considering the time of each lesson to be just shy of an hour, I could not include all of my above-mentioned recommendations in the case study. For example, since the students are not yet in high school and have not yet studied literature, and because I did not have a lengthy period to work with, I could not spend time exposing students to various plays or scenes in order to have them choose a particular one. I attempted to give the students autonomy and responsibility through other small choices as the project went along, which I will detail as I proceed to explain the lessons. Between one lesson and the next I posted instructions, updates, encouragement and documents on Google classroom, in order to keep the students involved and provide a space for them to ask questions or comment.

The play I decided to present to the students was *Romeo and Juliet*. This choice was an easy one for Italian students. I assumed that the students would be familiar with the play already, that they would generally know the plot, and thus would feel most at ease with studying it compared to other unknown plays. Also, it is a play that has two young protagonists close to the students' ages. The story takes place in the nearby city of Verona. This was another point of familiarity, but the deciding factor for me was one of the major conflicts in the play, that is the conflict between

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[151] See Appendix 1 for the lesson plan, which also includes all the handouts used throughout the project.

the youth and their parents. I was quite convinced that the students could relate to parents who are not able or willing to listen to their children. Romeo and Juliet are not able to tell their parents what is happening to them; they are not able to express themselves, and must look elsewhere to find consolation and help. Teenagers today could easily understand this difficulty, as it is a common complaint that parents do not really understand their teenage children. The fact that Juliet and Romeo turn to other adults, like the Friar and the Nurse demonstrates that youth do in fact seek out the advice, help and support of adults, but not necessarily their parents. In my years of experience teaching high school students I can confirm this, as I have had many students cry on my shoulder and confess their troubles, while admitting that their parents were not abreast of the problem or their related emotional difficulties.

With all of this in mind and the evident time constraint, I went ahead and chose a particular scene to focus on: Act III, scene v. This is the scene where Juliet's mother informs her she will be married to Paris in three days' time. Unbeknownst to her, Juliet is already married to Romeo. Juliet objects without explaining why, and then her father enters the scene. Upon hearing Juliet's refusal of the arranged marriage, Lord Capulet berates his daughter, ignores pleas from the Nurse, Lady Capulet and Juliet, and before leaving the scene tells Juliet she will marry Paris, or she will be estranged from the family. Juliet proceeds to seek her mother's help, but is refused. At the end, Juliet is left completely alone, and has not been able to confide in anyone.

3.2 The Lessons

3.2.1 The First Lesson

The first lesson began with a brainstorming question: *What do you know about Shakespeare?* As to be expected, in classes 3B and 3C, there was one student who with a groan expressed displeasure at the mere mention of that name. This sentiment did however dissipate immediately after starting and did not resurface. The classes' answers to the question were written on the whiteboard and students jotted them down in their English exercise books in a mind map format. The objective was to extract terms, not necessarily concepts or elaborate ideas. Any words connected to Shakespeare were written down on the board as well as in the students' notebooks.[152] When students ran out of ideas, I proceeded with two specific questions: *What type of literature did Shakespeare write?* This was aimed at extracting new vocabulary like drama, plays, playwrights and characters. This was followed by *What Shakespearean plays have you heard of?* in order to lead them to a brainstorm about *Romeo and Juliet.* In all three classes students actively participated in the brainstorming, and came up with many relevant and interesting terms. There were no long pauses and the ideas came from a majority of the students in each class. Thus, it was an active and interactive moment exhibiting a high level of participation and so interest. All three classes had at least heard of *Romeo and Juliet*, and in 3B and 3C some students were more or less able to reconstruct the plot orally in English for the rest of class.

Since all the students were at ease with discussing *Romeo and Juliet*, I confidently proceeded to tell them we would focus on this play. I then presented the plot of the play through a power point presentation full of images. At two different points in the plot, I paused the presentation and showed them two clips from the

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[152] See Appendix 2 for the results of the brainstorms in the three classes.

Luhrmann 1996 and the Carlei 2013 film versions of the play,[153] to spark the students' interest and trigger their emotions. Every single time I stopped the film clip the students complained in unison because they wanted to keep watching. Some students asked for details about the films so that they could watch them at home. A few students did in fact watch the Luhrmann version with Leonardo di Caprio of their own accord in the week following the first lesson, relaying this fact to me at the following class. The students paid attention throughout the lesson, even those who are usually completely inactive in class followed the plot reconstruction. In particular, 3A, which is a class with particularly bad behaviour where the majority of students are tuned out, remained engaged for the entire lesson.

After this initial introduction of the plot, I started a general conversation with students about the concept of consequences. I asked them if they knew what dominoes were. All three classes were able to answer. I compared dominoes to the decisions we make and the consequences that are generated, both positive and negative. I asked them if they thought the play was about a serious of consequences, and they said they did. I then handed out the worksheet entitled post-plot reflection exercise.[154] The idea was to see if they truly understood the plot, and at the same time demonstrate how all the characters' actions in the play were inter-related. We did the worksheet together as a class, with the worksheet projected on the digital interactive whiteboard, and students each had their own copy. Surprisingly, all the students in all the classes were able to do this exercise with ease, and enjoyed doing

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[153] The two moments were near the beginning when Romeo and Juliet, after having met and fallen in love realise that the other is from the rival family, and the moment when Juliet's cousin Tybalt kills Romeo's best friend Mercutio.
[154] See Appendix 1 for the post-plot reflection exercise worksheet.

it. This latter fact was perceivable through the fact that the answers were all provided in unison and with immediacy.

To finish, I asked the classes what they thought the moral of the story was. I also asked them who they thought to be responsible for Romeo and Juliet's deaths. The answers to these questions varied. In 3C the students said the moral is not to be angry, to let go of anger. They said Romeo and Juliet were responsible for their own deaths. One student said it was Juliet's family's fault. 3B students said the youth should move on, that there are more fish in the sea, that love has no limits, to be honest and not keep secrets, to choose your boyfriend better and to send many messages. They named Tybalt, Juliet, the Friar and the family as all responsible to some degree. 3A, when asked about the moral they said that love is a theme forever "prima come adesso," families should not fight, and your family will be happy if you die. This last comment was shocking, and came from a male student who is very well behaved but always quiet. It was the first time I had heard him express an opinion on anything, and unlike other times, he did not raise his hand before saying it, which led me to believe it was literally the first thing that came to his mind and he simply let it out. Other students responded saying no, come on, but I attempted to take this comment seriously and lead them to where I had thought they might go, that is that the parents carry some responsibility in the sad ending. In fact, I proceeded to ask the class if this was not a reflection of miscomprehension between the youth and their parents. They said it was so. I attempted to respond to this student saying that the problem was perhaps that the parents did not attempt to listen to their children, and thus their children thought they did not care about them, but that in reality their parents cared a great deal about them and sadly their children did not perceive it. I added my opinion that I felt the parents carried a great deal of

the blame, and suffered the ultimate consequence: losing their children. For homework, the students had to read a plot summary.[155] Some days later the main 3A class teacher received an email from a parent saying their daughter had fallen in love with literature, and wants to talk about *Romeo and Juliet* at her end-of-year exam where they must discuss various topics. I was surprised to hear of this reaction because this student shows absolutely no emotion in class and never speaks unless specifically asked a question. Clearly, it is not always easy to interpret the reactions of teens.[156]

3.2.2 The Second Lesson

When I entered the classroom for the 2nd lesson, students in all three classes were happily colouring the images of Romeo and Juliet on the handout I had given them for homework. I had not chosen the handout because the images were outlines and could be coloured in, but all the students said that they wanted to continue colouring them. I decided to let them finish while I asked about the plot and whether it was now clear for everyone exactly what happened in the story. Students were apparently greatly in need of a moment to be creative, and interestingly coloured the characters in distinct ways and in great detail. We then continued by viewing a very short British Council video of Romeo and Juliet in cartoon format.[157] Afterwards, I told the students it was their last opportunity to ask anything about the plot. Everyone said it was perfectly clear.

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[155] See Appendix 1 for the Plot Summary handout.

[156] See Appendix 3 for a photo of a quiet male student's notes from class 3A, after this lesson.

[157] Available at: https://learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org/short-stories/romeo-and-juliet.

I proceeded to explain that we would focus on a particular scene, Act III, scene v. I showed a slide with a short synopsis of the scene, and then proceeded to show them three very different versions of it. The first was an Italian theatrical version produced in Verona in the famous house of Juliet, from 2015.[158] I chose this version to put the students at ease, watching a version in their own language, performed in a nearby town. The students were quite shocked at the anger displayed by Lord Capulet, and described Lady Capulet as being very passive. After this theatrical version I showed them the 1996 Luhrmann film version,[159] which uses the original Shakespearean language. Not one student, in any of the three classes mentioned the difficulty of language, or that it was hard to understand, or anything else at all regarding the language. I was waiting for students to tell me that they could not understand anything, that it was impossible, but it never happened. They simply accepted the language, and I believe because of the first showing of the scene in their native tongue, were not overwhelmed by the original English. Lastly, I showed them an amateur high school production of the scene from the United States, where the students used contemporary, colloquial language instead of the original. It had been uploaded onto YouTube.[160] The students laughed a lot during this version. One student in 3C said he could understand that scene perfectly. He was the only student to mention anything about language during this lesson. Students then voted on their favourite version. Interestingly, not one class preferred the Italian version of the scene. Their favourite was the film version with the original Shakespearean English.

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[158] The students watched the scene starting at 7 minutes and 25 seconds at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3YESYgYJpI.

[159] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7kruGpEvLk.

[160] Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9sDUWaNYi4s&t=275s.

After these viewings I told students that we will look at the script from this scene, but that in order to do so, we need to be able to recognise some basic elements of a script. I proceeded with the power point presentation where I showed pictures of the script and explained where to find references to names of characters, acts, scenes, lines and stage directions. Students were then told that they would perform a part of this scene. In an attempt to give them autonomy and responsibility, the students were freely allowed to form groups of two or three. Surprisingly, this did not result in a moment of chaos, but instead students very happily and quickly chose their groups. For class 3A and 3B, due to a lack of time in class, I asked them to choose their scene partners for the following class. Once their groups were formed and they were sitting together, I proceeded to hand out the script. The script I had prepared was an abridged version of Act III, scene v, divided into two parts. Part one was the part of the scene with Juliet and her mother, and part two was with Juliet, her father and her mother. The handout had space under each line for the students to work on creating a simplified English version.[161] For homework they were to start working on their new version of the part of the scene.

3.2.3 The Fourth Lesson

This lesson was entirely dedicated to reworking their parts of the scene. Students brought dictionaries to work on this, and it was a very active class for the teacher, as I needed to rotate and help them through comprehending the language. By the end of the lesson, we reviewed their versions, taking bits and pieces from the different groups to form linguistically simplified versions of the scene. Students were allowed to accept or reject the other suggestions for the lines. Some groups

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[161] See Appendix 1 for the handout with the two parts of the scene.

worked better than others on this, as some had chosen weak group members. However, by the end of the lesson everyone had written almost all if not all of their new version. They relied heavily on what they knew happened in the scene. Although it was a difficult task, no one complained about the language being difficult. Their homework for the following week was to practice their lines, as the next lesson would be a rehearsal lesson.

3.2.4 The Fifth Lesson

The students were brought into the largest garden the school has, more than big enough to accommodate the average 10 groups per class. In this context the students could remove their mask required by law for Covid-19 prevention, and so interact naturally. I explained that they would have this hour to rehearse their scene. They had their lines and a pencil with them. I explained some basics for theatre production, including the importance of projecting your voice, facing the audience, and that every movement they made should have a purpose. The students then found a spot to work in and rehearse freely. At first when they found a spot they sat down. I told them they could not rehearse sitting down, and when they stood up, they began practicing their scenes. I rotated, watched their efforts and gave suggestions. When showing me their scene, two groups recited their lines in the original Shakespearean English. After they were done, I reminded them that they did not have to recite in that version, but could use the simple English version. I was surprised to learn that these two groups had decided they preferred the original version despite its difficulty, and so chose to perform it so.

3.2.5 The Sixth Lesson

Performance day arrived, and the classes were nervous. Some visibly felt good adrenaline and were very excited to finally perform their scene. Others seemed quite worried, but no one refused. For class 3C, their performance day turned out to be a rainy one, so instead of performing in the garden they performed in the theatre. To add to their difficulty, two other classes from the middle school showed up to watch their scenes. All groups did manage to perform, and the results were quite surprising. We discovered some students who were natural actors and put on very emotional performances. The majority of students had memorised their lines. Those who did not put on less convincing scenes, but for some it was evident that having their lines with them was simply to help them feel less nervous. The same was true for class 3B and 3A, who luckily had a sunny performance day and so were able to perform in the garden where they had rehearsed. It truly did feel like a "Shakespeare in the Park" theatre day, as the class rotated around this immense garden to watch the scenes in bamboo forests, on top of hills, around benches under old pines, or along streams and on small bridges. Performing outdoors, in the location where they rehearsed, gave the students visible confidence and ease. I allowed the students to choose their specific location in the garden for their rehearsal and performance, and this seemed to please them and give them confidence. Interestingly, almost no one chose the same location for their scene. Again, the groups who had memorised their lines and put effort into their rehearsals, gave very memorable performances, and many students said how much fun it was to perform. For the vast majority of students in all three classes, this was the first time they had put on a scene from a play, and it was the first time they had done so in a foreign language.

3.2.6 Feedback

At the end of this project, I gave the students a feedback form to fill out anonymously. [162] The purpose of this was to give students the opportunity to voice their opinions about the project without feeling observed or possibly judged. At this age, many students have great difficulty expressing themselves freely in front of their peers, thus a written feedback form seemed the only possibility of getting a sense of their true experiences. This form was written in both English and Italian, and the students were allowed to respond in whichever language they preferred. Most students filled it out in Italian. The first question simply asked whether they liked doing the project or not. The answer was unanimously positive in class 3C, with a majority of students indicating that they liked doing it because it was something different from what they normally do in class. They therefore perceived it as an unusual opportunity. In class 3B there were two students that said they did not enjoy doing it, one because they felt it was extra work, and the second because they simply did not like the topic. The second question asked what part of the project they enjoyed most. Here the answers varied from experiencing the adrenaline when getting up on stage and performing in front of others, the lesson on the plot of *Romeo and Juliet,* to rehearsing in the garden. The latter was the most popular answer. A few students mentioned that they enjoyed performing because it meant they confronted their fear of speaking in front of an audience.

The opposite question, what they did not like about the project, received two possible answers. The first was that the students did not like was rewriting the lines of the scene in simplified English. My objective in doing so was to give students the opportunity to read and understand the real Shakespearean language, while at

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[162] See Appendix 1 for the feedback form, as well as Appendix 4 for two specific examples filled out by students in class 3C.

the same time ensuring comprehension by writing a simplified version which they could then feel at ease with. In retrospect, seeing the lack of enthusiasm with this part of the project, perhaps I underestimated the students. Seeing as they never expressed any discomfort or worry at all regarding the difficulty of the language, perhaps it was indeed completely unnecessary to ask them to rewrite it in their own words. Obviously, this task was a way to ensure that everyone understood the lines, but perhaps it could have been simply reviewed together for comprehension, without needing to create a personally abridged version. The second answer was that the students in class 3C did not appreciate having to perform in front of other classes. This would have of course heightened the emotion right before performance, and for most people increased anxiety about performing. It was not planned that two other classes would come and watch the scenes. Just a few minutes before the class started the Vice-Principle was invited to watch, and she decided to bring her class with her. The other class simply showed up with their teacher after having heard that we were about to perform our scenes. Upon seeing the negative reaction of the class, I apologised to the students afterwards for the extra audience. There were however two students in that class that actually wrote on the feedback form that they appreciated the extra adrenaline that it caused.

The last two questions were whether they would like to do other projects similar to this one, and whether they would like to read or watch a Shakespearean play. Regarding the first question, apart from one student the answer was yes, with the most common explanation being that it was fun to learn through a different method. The one student in class 3C who said no explained their answer by saying

"No perché non sono bravo e perché ho paura di sbagliare."[163] It is not specified what this student feels they are not good at, whether it be the English language or acting, but they did specify in the question regarding what they did not like that they did not like feeling the adrenaline before performing because they were scared to make a mistake. Perhaps it was the concept of performance then that caused this student stress. They did however indicate that they liked doing the project a lot. The last question, whether they would like to read or watch a Shakespearean play had three possible options to choose from: yes, no and maybe. For class 3C there were 12 affirmative answers, two negative answers, and nine maybes. In classes 3B and 3A there were 13 affirmative answers, three negative answers, and twelve maybes.

There was extra space at the end of form for extra comments, and in classes 3C and 3A seven students wrote something, mostly thanking me for the opportunity and the experience. One student also thanked me for my patience, while two students wrote that they would really like to do other similar projects because they had so much fun and they like working in groups. In class 3B eight students wrote something in the extra comments section, five of whom thanked me and others wrote that it's nice to act, that they really did enjoy the project, and lastly that they would like to do other projects like this one.

3.3 Observations

The most interesting aspect I observed throughout this project was related to the lack of complaints. At the middle school level, teachers are quite used to hearing students complain about doing projects and tasks that require various lessons to

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[163] Translated into English: "No because I am not good [at it] and because I am scared to make a mistake."

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complete, or certainly in regards to presentations. I was absolutely flabbergasted that not one person in classes 3B and 3C once complained about the project. There was only one student in class 3A who upon hearing that they would put on a scene asked if they had to do it, because they were scared. Having anxiety or nervousness about performance is quite understandable and to be expected. What was shocking for me was that there were no comments among the three classes regarding the difficulty of the language we encountered. The fact that no one said they didn't understand, that it was too hard, that this language was strange, was very surprising. These students do not have a very high level of competency in the English language. Why would they not be intimidated by Shakespearean language? These students simply accepted it for what it was. What is more, many openly expressed that they preferred it to their simplified, abridged versions. This indicates, together with the fact that many students listed the rewriting into simplified versions the lesson they enjoyed least, that perhaps when the topic is approached from the right angle, it is not necessary at all to attempt to simplify the language for English second language students.

Perhaps it negatively contributes to the heightened emotional atmosphere created in the classroom during the exploratory phase to attempt to analyse the language from a syntactical or grammatical point of view. If we are attempting to bring students as close as possible to the author's work, to experience this rich subjective space and create a positive relationship with this type of literature which may lead to a prolonged life-interest in Shakespeare, we should avoid introducing activities that veer away from positive emotions and which are simply unnecessary. If students are not intimidated or turned off by the difficulty inherent in Shakespearean language there is no need to have students re-write it. That being

said, the original lines of the text presented to students were abridged, that is they were shorter than the original. Some of the lines and words were removed, in order to make the scenes shorter and thus more manageable. This is however different from having the students rewrite lines in a level of English they know. Thus, I would suggest that this particular task was not only unnecessary, but also negatively affected the positive emotional atmosphere in the classroom during the project and should be left out of similar future projects. I would however, confirm that it is useful to present the students with an abridged version so that the quantity of text is not overwhelming.

It may also be concluded that the extensive use of mediums including photographs, images even on the handouts, videos of various versions, in various languages, and in varying degrees of professionalism are highly effective. Students developed confidence and opinions about the various performances and about the characters and their choices. This indicates a high level of personal involvement with the topic, and thus a strong subjective experience. The aesthetic experience was powerful for students, and this was also evident through the lack of interest in looking at the technical side of the script itself. The students wanted to continue in the experience that was this project. Their active participation through questions and expression of opinions even when dealing with more difficult aspects like plot reconstruction and exploration of themes and responsibility for the tragic aspect in the play was representative of their rich experience. It is now clear that the order of presenting such activities was greatly important. As was hoped, by working at first to relieve any tension regarding difficulty in comprehension students were able to grapple with more challenging aspects without stress. Thus, it is recommended to allot however much time is necessary to presenting the plot so that students feel

confident enough to confront more complex layers of analysis. It certainly did prove useful to present the plot through visually stimulating presentations, watching the scene performed in their country, in their language, to then move on to a professional one in English, and finally an amateur performance by their peers from the USA. By the time this exploratory phase was finished, students demonstrated total ease with the scene, and thus with the intricate text.

Finally, the opportunity to perform turned out to be the ideal culminating event of the project. Having students work on the scene in order to prepare for performance gave them the opportunity first of all to practice the language. It justified the intense repetition and therefore resulted in linguistic enrichment for each student. Secondly, it was a confidence boost as ultimately being able to perform even a piece of a Shakespearean scene was a very tangible accomplishment. This came through in the feedback forms, which included comments regarding the positive adrenaline and fun felt during performance. One student in class 3C approached me afterwards asking me information about a youth theatre class or course he could join. It also gave a purpose to the entire project, as we needed to do all the initial tasks in order to be able to perform. Students were able to produce something. They chose their partners. They chose where and how to perform. The scenes were theirs, not the teacher's. This is empowering for youth and contributes positively to their learning. They are the protagonists in their education in this scenario.

This case study proved highly revealing for this research. Having the opportunity to apply what I have been able to conclude after extensive research and reflection was of inestimable value. Although these students are not in high school but in their last year of middle school, it was perhaps even more telling, since these

students presented me with a clean slate. These are not students who have chosen to study literature. These are not students who have indicated any particular interest in English or English culture. These are students who are still in an experimental phase where their educational direction has yet to narrow. Thus, I did not have a group of students who had already manifested an interest in the topic and had chosen to pursue it at a high school level. The result was that the students' reactions to the project were far more telling than they would have been with a narrower interest group. Moreover, for a teacher I admit it was thus more gratifying, as I feel I have contributed to planting a seed. That seed may represent an interest in theatre, Shakespeare, performance, English or simply literature. It may grow and blossom, or it may remain dormant. It is however a seed which was not there before. What is more, it is one which sits in the positivity and enjoyment of a new experience. I could not have asked for a better result.

Conclusion

Teaching Shakespeare continues to be hard. It can be daunting to take on such an epic playwright and attempt to transmit his greatness to today's youth. Since the dawn of the digital age, this task's formulation has changed. In a way, it has become even more difficult, as teaching has attempted to adapt to a technological world, where online lessons and teaching tools have become the norm. When the Sars-Covid 19 pandemic broke out in late 2019 in Italy, most high school English literature classes began to be given online. We have entered a new phase where digital tools are not merely a recommended addition, but are the skin and bones of most lessons. Teachers are thereby catapulted into the world of online teaching, whether they like it or not. As has been the case over the years, Shakespeare is yet again being adapted to suit our society's current needs.

It is clear that Shakespeare needs to stay. His works continue to provide windows of opportunity for youth to explore parts of themselves, of society, to test themselves and discover a new art form. The author provides a rich subjective space between the student and the works, where personal discovery and growth is possible. The school's role is to provide the opportunity, facilitate its presence and optimise on its potential. The teacher is fundamental, not because they are the centre of the classroom, but because they have the ability to put the student in that important space, giving them the tools they need to take responsibility for their learning. The student is at the forefront, and must be given the primary role in the exploration of the material they are provided with at school.

Previous research on Shakespeare and his place in literary theory, the English curriculum and practical activities for the classrooms abounds. The problem is that one can get easily lost in all these fragmented flashes of recommendations which do not converge into any practical approach to teaching Shakespeare in the classroom. There is an astronomical amount of publications dealing with a plethora of aspects related to Shakespeare and his plays, the contents of which are often focused on one particular aspect, thus the usable information is piecemeal and scattered, as well as often being contradictory or at odds with one another.

Teachers of today can therefore find it difficult to formulate an approach which takes all the recommendations into consideration. Moreover, the needs of the current students living through a pandemic which has radically changed the school system are in evolution. Thus, previous research demonstrates limitations in being able to bring us forward. It deals with many aspects which are still relevant, but it does not address the challenges we are now facing. Both teachers and students need digital knowledge and know-how as quickly as possible. Teachers need to be trained in digital skills. They need this in order to be able to survive the current school reality which requires them in order to function. They also need the skills and mediums in order to create lessons which are captivating for today's youth and be able to teach the students how to manage the vast array of digital tools available to them. The research carried out herein is thus novel in that it draws from the range of information in order to weave a holistic approach to teaching Shakespeare that is in line with the particular needs of today, making space for our digitalised and ever-changing world.

This analysis has concentrated on teaching Shakespearean plays in high school classrooms. The focus has thus been quite specific, and has not taken into

consideration the teaching of Shakespearean sonnets for example, nor has it considered other playwrights. I have deliberately narrowed in on Shakespearean plays since they are a fundamental part of the high school English curriculum. In particular, I have looked at the challenges facing students whose first language is not English. This is due to the fact that these students make up the majority of those studying Shakespeare in the world, and their unique needs should be taken into consideration when developing an approach for the classroom. There are thus some considerations presented here that may not be necessary for English mother-tongue students.

The opportunities for case studies in this particular period are unfortunately limited. The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in strict rules regarding who may enter and exit school properties, and has severely reduced the amount and nature of experiences which students may have. Finding a high school who would accommodate an external teacher to carry out a project such as that detailed herein was not possible. Instead, there was the opportunity to do so in the school where I currently teach, since the year 8 students were already in contact with me on a weekly basis. Moreover, there were some limitations in terms of the time which could be spent on such a project. In order to be able to implement the full range of suggestions formulated post-research I would have needed more time, in particular for the exploratory phase, with access to the computer lab. Unfortunately, this was not possible. Future research might look into a lengthier project making more use of computer labs at school and could focus specifically on high school students. Also, one could look at whether these findings could be applied to a wider spectrum of teaching literature in the high school classroom, considering other types of literature written by dissimilar authors from differing periods. In this way one could

verify whether the approach herein can be considered relevant for teaching literature in general.

This research does however offer suggestive evidence proposing a change in the approach to teaching Shakespearean plays in the high school classroom. The concrete indications are that students need to be the centre of classroom, meaning they should be put in the principal position as drivers and contributors to their own development. In order to do so students need to be placed in a condition of responsibility and action, taking a hands-on approach to the Shakespearean plays they have chosen to study. Students should participate in the selection of the play or the scene to focus on, and be allowed to perform. The performances could be in a theatre, a garden, or in video format, even uploaded online. Some of these choices might be left directly to the class. The teacher's role is that of a guide. They are there to present students with the material and the means to conduct their own experiment in learning. They thus need to be well prepared to manage all the digital mediums deemed appropriate for the project in question. Their training is to be considered essential and should be offered as part of their training prior to, but also during, their career in teaching.

Teachers also need to balance the content they are presenting to students when the class is not completely made up of mother-tongue English students. Approaches in CLIL can thus be useful to remember not to overburden students with excessive amounts of new language at the same time as new content, but should seek a balance within lessons, giving each its appropriate moment. Supporting students while providing them with abridged texts or secondary pieces could be highly effective in alleviating stress that can arise due to the sheer difficulty of the language present in Shakespearean plays, or due to culturally different perspectives that make content

comprehension difficult. All of the above is directed at bringing the piece of literature in question as close as possible to the student recipient in order to foster a unique, subjective experience that can lead to growth on a personal and educational level.

Within this framework Shakespeare may continue to forge connections with youth in our contemporary society. The differences that exist between his time and ours are no hinderance at all, because the aesthetic value in his works is every bit as in tune with our nature as people today as it was then. Many of the obstacles we imagine to teaching Shakespeare should remain precisely inside that self-perpetuated world we call our imagination. They are mere constructions. Students studying Shakespeare have taught me that. Given the opportunity, they go directly to the heart of the works. Teachers can boast great satisfaction if they can witness that sense of accomplishment, beaming from their students' faces after having performed a piece of Shakespeare. Let the author into the classroom, and let the students negotiate his future.

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Lesson Plan for Case Study

Didactic Unit Title: Shakespeare – Romeo and Juliet

School: Istituto E. di Sardagna – Castello di Godego
Class: 3° media, scuola superiore di primo grado
Teacher: Barbara Falsetto
Class subject: English

Prerequisites (disciplinary e linguistic)

Basic English skills developed in the previous years of schooling. This Didactic Unit was preceded by lessons regarding pronunciation and general oral competences.

Didactic Goals

1. Learn basic information regarding who Shakespeare is. 2. Learn what a Shakespearean play is composed of (its parts). 3. Learn the plot line and basic themes of *Romeo and Juliet*. 4. Recite a part of a scene.

Linguistic Goals (Know and know-how)

1. Learn the basic vocabulary regarding scripts (act, scene, characters, stage direction, props, etc). 2. Become familiar with the type of language in *Romeo and Juliet*. 3. Learn how to approach difficult language, how to simplify language when needed. 4. Learn how to rehearse and improve one's pronunciation.

Wider Goals (common to various subjects)

1. Learn how to observe using the various senses (sight and hearing).

2. Learn to work in groups to execute a performance.

3. Learn how to express opinions and ideas clearly regarding plays.

4. Learn to appreciate a Shakespearean play.

5. Learn how to analyse themes and evaluate relevance for current times.

Overall time

5 lessons, one hour each.

Methodology

Brainstorming.

Participatory – question and answer sessions with students using visual and audio aids.

Pair work for vocabulary building and reinforcement.

Multi-media viewing and commenting.

Group rehearsal and preparation for scenes.

Use of indoor and outdoor spaces.

Tools

Images on LIM, PPT, videos (amateur, professional, in Italian and English), worksheets, lines printed on cardboard paper.

Evaluation

Review of comprehension through short worksheet exercises.

Observation of group participation.

Final scene performance.

Detailed Lesson Plan

LESSON 1:

Motivational phase, brainstorming, exercises on new vocabulary, etc.

PRE-TASK

	Activate students through questions, then reflection exercise.

1st task
 	
Duration:
	1. Open **PPT** on LIM to first page: "What do you know about Shakespeare?"
	
	Students are invited to express what they know about Shakespeare. Write answers on the whiteboard in a mindmap format. The objective is to extract terms, not necessarily concepts or elaborate ideas. Any words connected to Shakespeare.
	
	When students run out of answers, ask specifically:
	
	What type of literature did Shakespeare write? (Vocabulary: drama, plays, playwrights, characters)
	What plays have you heard of? (If not mentioned, add *Romeo and Juliet*)
	
	Slide: What do you know about *Romeo and Juliet*? Write answers on whiteboard.
	
	2. Tell students we are going to focus on this play. Show students **PPT** that explains the plot with simple language and many images. At appropriate slides show corresponding video clips:
	    1. "Romeo + Juliet (1996) 4K Is she a Capulet?" starting at 1:34
	    2. "Tybalt kills Mercutio (Carlei)"
	
	20-30 minutes

2nd task *Duration:*	1. Ask students to reflect on the story, thinking about how the actions of the characters generated consequences. **Handout 1.** Complete together as a class discussion. The handout seeks to have students reflect on the consequences of the actions of the characters, and so the ability to stop a negative cycle if one makes wise decisions. The teacher collects the various responses orally and discusses them as the answers to the handout are inserted on the LIM. 20 minutes Homework: Students read **handout 2**, a summary of the plot of Romeo and Juliet.

LESSON 2:

Analysis and elaboration phase. Group work and text interaction.

<div align="center">**TASK CYCLE**</div>

	Focus on a scene, present the activity, group work

1ˢᵗ task	**1**. Students watch BBC video that summarizes plot in simple English: https://learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org/short-stories/romeo-and-juliet (Duration 3:27)
	
	Ask students if they have questions about the plot.
	
	2. Back to the **PPT**. Introduce the scene we will focus on: Act III, scene v. Fight between Juliet and her parents regarding marriage to Paris. Review details of scene (info on slide).
	
	 Show students the three interpretations of the scene:
	    1. In Italian, a theatrical production in Verona done in La casa di Giuletta. "Relife 2015, Allodola e litigio papà Capuleti" (video: from 7:25 to 14:50).
	    2. 1996 Lurrhman film version. "Forced Marriage (Romeo + Juliet)". (Total video time: 2:59).
	    3. American high school production of the scene, uploaded on YouTube (video: from 2:48 to 4:35).
	
	After each viewing, ask students for **their reactions**: Was this a believable interpretation? What do you think about Lord Capulet's approach to the situation? Who is at fault here?

Duration:	At the end of all viewings, **students vote** on their favourite version. 25-30 minutes Homework: Students bring English-Italian or English dictionaries to next class.

LESSON 3:

Group work, language analysis and script writing

<div align="center">**TASK CYCLE**</div>

1ˢᵗ task	**1.** Tell students we will now look at the language of this scene. To understand it, we need to know how to read the script. Go through **three slides** explaining: how characters

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	are listed, where to find reference to the act and scene (and how plays are divided into these), how to find stage directions. **2**. Students are divided into **groups** of two and three. Groups of two are presented with a part of Act III, scene v (with Juliet and her mother), and the groups of three with another part (with Juliet, her mother and father). **3**. **Handout 3.** Tell students they are to read their part of the scene, and attempt to simplify the language, writing their version below each line. Teachers circulate and help and correct the simplified versions. At the end of the lesson the teacher reviews the various versions compiling the options in the document open on the LIM. Students are free to accept or reject their classmates' suggestions.
Duration:	
	1 hour **Homework.** Explain to students that next week they will practice and perform their scene. For homework students decide who will be each character and practice their lines aloud, attempting to memorize as much as they can.

Lesson 4:

Group work, rehearsal and language reproduction.

TASK CYCLE

	Group work, prepare a scene.
1ˢᵗ task	**1**. Bring students into the garden, taking only their **lines and a pencil** with them. Sit on the grass in a circle. Explain that this class is dedicated to preparing their scenes, which they will perform for the class the following week. Explain that the goal is not to become professional actors, but to be able to deliver lines coherently in English. Remind them that to do a scene properly, there are a few golden rules to follow: 1. Almost always face the audience when you speak, not the other character. 2. Speak clearly and loudly. **2**. Allow students to find an area to work. Let them **rehearse**. Students are given free time to explore their scene, deciding on lie delivery, as well as how they should move. The **teacher circulates, guides and encourages** students, making students

	aware that they can decide on props or costumes they think necessary. **3**. 10 minutes before the end of class, call students back together in the centre of the garden. Tell them they should **take their lines home with them to practice**, and if possible memorise. Students are allowed to keep their lines with them during the performance if they choose to do so. Remind students to **bring any props or costume items** that might help them during this scene.
Duration:	1 hour

LESSON 5:

Presentations

<div align="center">**TASK CYCLE**</div>

	Group presentations, reflection.
1st task	**1**. Students are given 5-10 minutes to talk to their group members and **prepare** their props/costumes. **2.** Students **present their scenes** to the class. Remind students that in a theatre the audience must be quiet and not interrupt. Allow for comments only at the end.
Duration:	1 hour

<div align="center">**POST-TASK**</div>

Students are invited to complete an anonymous feedback form. Handout 4.

Material:

Handout 1 – Post-plot reflection exercise

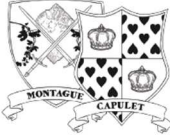Name : _____
Romeo and Juliet
Post plot comprehension exercise

1. *Because of the family feud, Tybalt **is angry** when he sees Romeo with Juliet.*

2. *Because Tybalt **is angry**, he kills _____.*

3. *Because Tybalt kills _____, Romeo kills _____.*

4. *Because Romeo kills _____, he is _____.*

5. *Because Romeo is _____, Juliet makes a plan but Romeo doesn't _____ from Friar Lawrence.*

6. *Because Romeo doesn't _____, he thinks Juliet is dead and _____.*

7. *Because Romeo is _____, Juliet _____.*

8. *Because Romeo and Juliet _____, the families _____.*

What happens each time someone retaliates?

Does it make the situation better or worse?

Is it better to retaliate or try to forgive people?

Answers:
- 1. *Because of the family feud, Tybalt is angry when he sees Romeo with Juliet.*
- 2. *Because Tybalt is angry, he kills Mercutio.*
- 3. *Because Tybalt kills Mercutio, Romeo kills Tybalt.*
- 4. *Because Romeo kills Tybalt, he is sent away.*
- 5. *Because Romeo is sent away, Juliet makes a plan but Romeo doesn't find out about it.*
- 6. *Because Romeo doesn't find out about it, he thinks Juliet is dead and kills himself.*
- 7. *Because Romeo is dead, Juliet kills herself.*
- 8. *Because Romeo and Juliet are dead, the families end their feud.*

Handout 2 – Summary reading

Romeo and Juliet **Plot**

This is the story of Romeo and Juliet, two young lovers who lived in Verona, in Italy.

In Verona, there were two families who were feuding. The families were named the Montagues and Capulets and they had hated one another for a long time – although they could no longer remember why they were fighting. At the beginning of the play, the Prince of Verona warns both families that anyone caught fighting in the streets of Verona will be sentenced to death.

One of the main characters is named Romeo Montague. Romeo is usually a peaceful young man and is more interested in love than fighting. At the beginning of the play, Romeo tells his cousin Benvolio and his friend Mercutio that he is in love with a girl called Rosaline for a girl, but that she does not love him back. Benvolio and Mercutio tell him to forget about her and go with them to a masked ball at the Capulets' house. They know it will be dangerous because they are Montagues, but they think it will be fun as they will be in disguise.

Lord Capulet has a daughter who is called Juliet. He wants Juliet to marry Count Paris and is excited for them to spend time together at the party. When his nephew, Tybalt, tells him that there are Montagues at the party, Capulet demands that Tybalt leave them alone to enjoy the party. While Romeo is at the party, he meets Juliet – but he does not know that she is a Capulet. He falls in love with her at first sight. It is not until later that they realise that they are from the two different families and, because of that, they will not be able to be together.

Romeo decides to risk his life and sneaks to Juliet's bedroom window to speak to her. Juliet tells her nurse that she is in love with Romeo, but she doesn't realise that he is listening. They speak at the window and make plans to secretly get married, even though their families are enemies. The next day, Romeo and Juliet go to Friar Lawrence who agrees to marry them. Friar Lawrence hopes their marriage will help to bring peace to the families.

On the way home from the wedding, Tybalt, who is angry because the Montagues went to the Capulet party, challenges Romeo to a duel. Romeo refuses to fight and Mercutio agrees to fight Tybalt instead. Romeo tries to stop the fight, but Tybalt stabs Mercutio and kills him. Romeo is so angry that Mercutio is dead that he fights Tybalt and kills him. Romeo is exiled to Mantua by the Prince of Verona.

Juliet is really upset to hear that her husband Romeo has to leave Verona. She has another problem, too: her father is forcing her to marry Count Paris in three days' time. She doesn't know what to do, so she goes to Friar Lawrence for advice. Friar Lawrence gives Juliet a special type of poison. The poison will make her fall into a very deep sleep for 42 hours and everyone will think she is dead. Friar Lawrence plans to send a message to Romeo so that he can come back to Verona and meet up with Juliet when she wakes up in her family's tomb. Then they can leave Verona and be together.

Juliet does this, but Friar Lawrence's message never makes it to Romeo. Instead, Romeo hears that Juliet is dead and he returns to Verona, having bought some deadly poison. He goes to Juliet in the tomb, drinks the poison and dies. When Juliet wakes up, she finds Romeo lying dead next to her. She is so upset that she takes his dagger and kills herself.

This story is a tragedy because the ending is so sad. It is even sadder because, when the Montagues and the Capulets learn what happened with their children, the families agree to end the years of fighting. The Prince of Verona hopes that the story of Romeo and Juliet will help to keep Verona a peaceful place in future.

Secondary   Page 1 of 2   visit twinkl.com

Secondary   Page 2 of 2   visit twinkl.com

Handout 3 – Abridged scenes worksheet, parts 1 and 2

Romeo and Juliet
Act III, Scene v

(PART ONE, with Lady Capulet and Juliet)

ENTER LADY CAPULET

LADY CAPULET Why, how now, Juliet?

_____

JULIET Madam, I am not well.

_____

LADY CAPULET Weeping for your cousin's death?

_____

Well, well, thou hast a careful father, child;

_____

One who, to put thee from thy heaviness

_____

Hath sorted out a sudden day of joy.

_____

JULIET What day is that?

_____

LADY CAPULET Marry, my child, early next Thursday morn

_____

The gallant Paris shall happily make thee a joyful bride.

_____

JULIET He shall not make me a joyful bride!

_____

I pray you, tell my lord and father, madam,

_____

I will not marry yet. And when I do, I swear

_____

It shall be Romeo,

_____

Rather than Paris.

LADY CAPULET [*shocked*]
Tell him so yourself,

_____

And see how he will take it at your hands.

_____

Romeo and Juliet
Act III, Scene v

(PART TWO, with Lady Capulet, Capulet and Juliet)

ENTER CAPULET

LADY CAPULET Sir, she will none, she gives you thanks.

_____

CAPULET How? Will she none?

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_____

Is she not proud? Doth she not count her blest,

_____

Unworthy as she is, that we have wrought

_____

So worthy a gentleman to be her bridegroom?

_____

Go with Paris to Saint Peter's Church,

_____

Or I will drag thee.

_____

JULIET Hear me with patience but to speak a word.

_____

CAPULET Disobedient wretch!

_____

An you be mine, I'll give you to my friend;

_____

And you be not, hang, beg, starve, die in the streets.

_____

EXIT CAPULET

JULIET O, sweet my mother, cast me not away!

_____

Delay this marriage for a month, a week,

_____

Or, if you do not, make the bridal bed

_____

In that monument where Tybalt lies.

_____

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LADY CAPULET Talk not to me, for I'll not speak a word:

_____

Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee.

_____

EXIT LADY CAPULET without looking at JULIET

Handout 4 – Feedback Form

Shakespeare – _Romeo & Juliet_ Project   Feedback Form   Class: 3 ____ (A, B, or C)

Please answer the questions. You can answer in Italian or English.

1. Did you like doing the project? _Ti è piaciuto realizzare questo progetto?_____
_____
_____

2. What part did you enjoy most? _Quale parte ti è piaciuta di più?_
_____
_____
_____

3. What did you NOT like about the project? _Che cosa NON ti è piaciuto del progetto?_
_____
_____
_____

4. Would you like to do more projects like this one? Why/Why not?
Ti piacerebbe realizzare altri progetti simili? Perché?/Perché no?
_____
_____
_____

5. Would you like to read/watch a Shakespearean play? _Ti piacerebbe leggere/andare a vedere un'opera di Shakespeare?_
yes ☐   no ☐   maybe ☐

Extra comments:
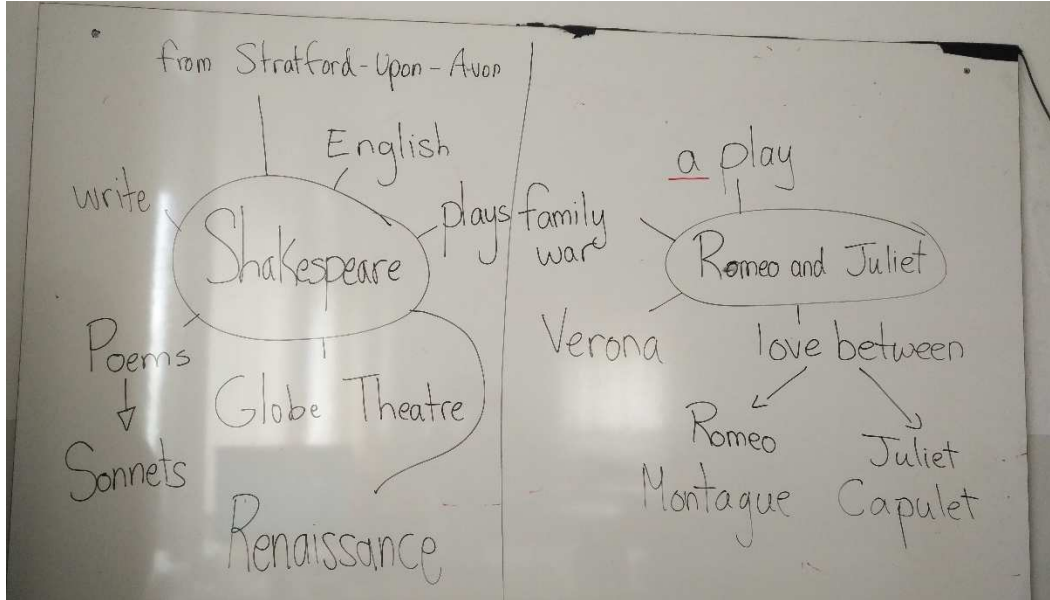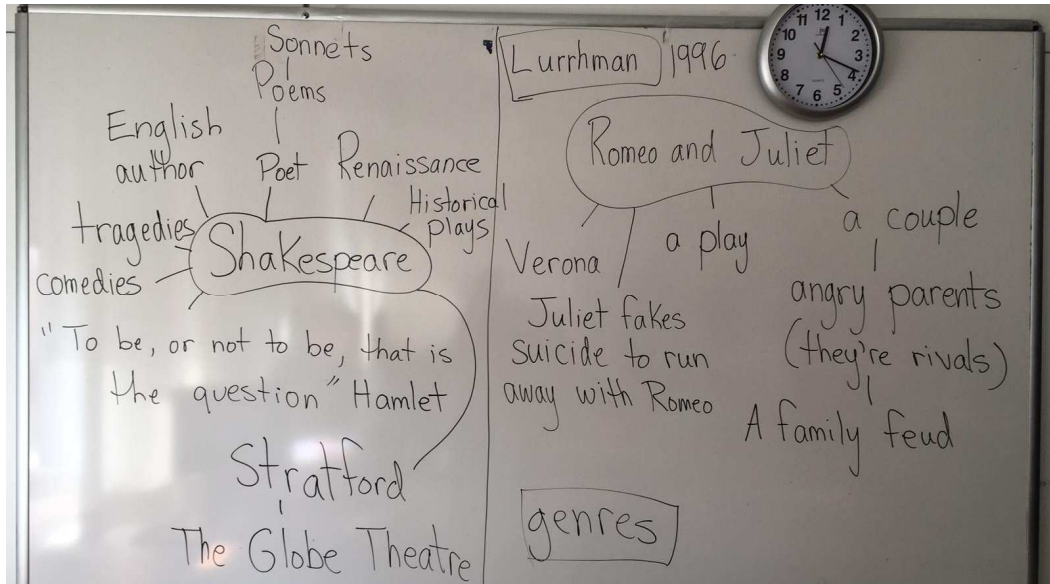_____
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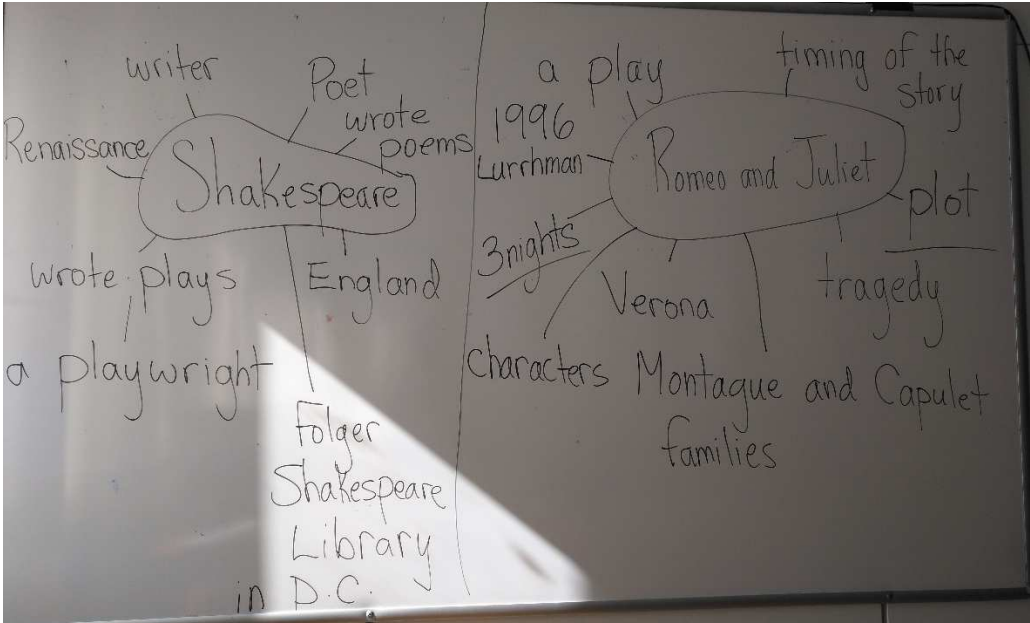Thank you for participating! 😊

Appendix 2

Class Brainstorms

Class 3A:

Class 3B:

Class 3C:

A whiteboard mind map. Central node "Shakespeare" connects to: writer, Poet, wrote poems, Renaissance, wrote plays, a playwright, England, Folger Shakespeare Library in D.C. Central node "Romeo and Juliet" connects to: a play, 1996, Lurrhman, 3 nights, timing of the story, plot, tragedy, Verona, characters Montague and Capulet families.

Appendix 4

Feedback Forms from Class 3C

First Example:

Shakespeare – *Romeo & Juliet* Project   Feedback Form   Class: 3 _C_ (A, B, or C)

Please answer the questions. You can answer in Italian or English.

1. Did you like doing the project? *Ti è piaciuto realizzare questo progetto?* Yes, I liked it very much, because in this project I have learned so much, and I've got a lot of funny during the scene.

2. What part did you enjoy most? *Quale parte ti è piaciuta di più?*
Honestly, I've liked everything of this project because I enjoied in the theory and the play.

3. What did you NOT like about the project? *Che cosa NON ti è piaciuto del progetto?*
I've liked everything at all.

4. Would you like to do more projects like this one? Why/Why not?

Ti piacerebbe realizzare altri progetti simili? Perché?/Perché no?

Yes, I'd like, because it's a good experience to do and it i can repeat that I would like do it.

5. Would you like to read/watch a Shakespearean play? *Ti piacerebbe leggere/andare a vedere un'opera di Shakespeare?*

yes ☐   no ☐   maybe ☒

Extra comments:
Thanks Mrs, Falsetto for the patience and for the experience.

Thank you for participating! 😊

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Second Example:

Shakespeare – *Romeo & Juliet* Project   Feedback Form   Class: 3 __C__ (A, B, or C)

Please answer the questions. You can answer in Italian or English.

1. Did you like doing the project? *Ti è piaciuto realizzare questo progetto?* MI È PIACIUTO MOLTO CONOSCERE UN PEZZO DI LETTERATURA INGLESE E METTERMI ALLA PROVA NEL RECITARE IL DIALOGO.

2. What part did you enjoy most? *Quale parte ti è piaciuta di più?*

LA PARTE CHE MI È PIACIUTA DI PIÙ È STATA LA SECONDA IN CUI ABBIAMO RECITATO, DOVE HO POTUTO AFFRONTARE LE MIE PAURE NEL PARLARE DIFRONTE A MOLTE PERSONE

3. What did you NOT like about the project? *Che cosa NON ti è piaciuto del progetto?*

NON MI È PIACIUTA LA PARTE IN CUI ABBIAMO DOVUTO TRADURRE LE BATTUTE

4. Would you like to do more projects like this one? Why/Why not?

Ti piacerebbe realizzare altri progetti simili? Perché?/Perché no?

MI PIACEREBBE SI PERCHÉ POSSIAMO CONOSCERE AUTORI/ TESTI APPARTENENTI A DIVERSE CULTURE.

5. Would you like to read/watch a Shakespearean play? *Ti piacerebbe leggere/andare a vedere un'opera di Shakespeare?*

yes [X]   no [ ]   maybe [ ]

Extra comments:

MI PIACEREBBE FARE DEI LAVORI DI GRUPPO PIÙ SPESSO CON GRUPPI ANCHE PIÙ NUMEROSI E ATTIVITÀ PIÙ COINVOLGENTI/DIVERTENTI.

Thank you for participating! ☺

Summary in Italian

Shakespeare occupa un posto ormai stabile nei programmi di letteratura inglese, è da sempre presente nelle scuole di tanti paesi di tutto il mondo, anglofoni e non, e la quantità di ricerche e pubblicazioni sull'autore e le sue opere è incommensurabile, soprattutto in riferimento agli ultimi centocinquant'anni. I contenuti di questi studi si limitano prevalentemente a poche domande spesso ricorrenti: in primo luogo, in molti cercano di trovare il motivo per cui Shakespeare continui ad avere così tanto seguito a distanza di secoli dalla sua morte, per capire quali siano le qualità che rappresentano la magnificenza della sua produzione artistica. Un'ulteriore domanda, a cui tanti hanno provato a rispondere, riguarda la possibilità o meno che sia incluso del programma di letteratura delle scuole. Nonostante al giorno d'oggi il dibattito al riguardo si sia affievolito, fino alla metà del XX secolo è stato oggetto di attente discussioni e si può attribuire alla tenacia degli insegnanti di letteratura la presenza oggi di Shakespeare nei programmi scolastici, consolidatasi non solo nei paesi anglofoni ma anche nei vari stati del mondo dove si studia inglese come lingua seconda. Infine, fra le innumerevoli ricerche sul tema, alcune sono dedicate all'insegnamento di Shakespeare all'interno del programma di inglese ma, nonostante l'unanimità sul fatto che l'autore debba essere oggetto di studio, rimane grande il dubbio su come impostare l'attività didattica.

Certi studi si occupano semplicemente di registrare le difficoltà che gli insegnanti incontrano nel lavorare con questi materiali, accanto alla frustrazione vissuta dagli studenti. Esistono tuttavia diverse guide con esercizi pratici da proporre in classe, inoltre alcuni recenti libri e articoli accademici suggeriscono delle modalità

di presentazione di Shakespeare all'interno delle lezioni di inglese come lingua seconda e spunti su come affrontare lo studio dell'autore da parte di studenti di culture diverse o su come proporre un approccio in linea con la società contemporanea. Ciò che accomuna queste pubblicazioni è la tendenza ad affrontare un solo aspetto critico relativo all'insegnamento di Shakespeare, mentre sono pochissimi i lavori che cercano di analizzare più di un problema contemporaneamente. Di conseguenza mancano delle vere e proprie guide che gli insegnanti possano seguire e non esiste alcuna proposta di un metodo olistico: se un insegnante della scuola secondaria è alla ricerca di consigli su come avvicinarsi all'insegnamento di Shakespeare, si troverà di fronte a un numero enorme di pubblicazioni su così tanti sotto-argomenti da portarlo ad abbandonare abbastanza rapidamente l'intento e semplicemente attenersi al libro di testo.

Il problema di tale tendenza risiede nei testi di letteratura inglese a disposizione degli insegnanti in Italia, che continuano ad essere monodirezionali e affrontano la letteratura dallo stesso punto di partenza, procedendo secondo lo stesso schema lineare, ripetendo di volta in volta esattamente la stessa formula. Gli esercizi di analisi del testo sono esclusivamente scritti e solo talvolta includono una traccia per la discussione ispirata al contenuto dell'estratto. Non vi è alcun invito a sperimentare il teatro e la recitazione, a esplorare il suono della lingua nel momento in cui si legge ad alta voce, non sono previsti giochi di ruolo e neppure estratti di eventuali versioni cinematografiche, né esercizi che mirino a chiedere agli studenti la loro opinione sul valore o sull'importanza del contenuto. I testi sono tutti profondamente monotoni e prevedibili, in questo modo la responsabilità di rendere l'argomento accattivante ricade nuovamente sul docente. Affinché un insegnante possa affrontare questa sfida, ha bisogno di informazioni chiare e ben organizzate che includano una proposta olistica da utilizzare in classe.

È proprio in questo vuoto che si trova un potenziale di miglioramento. L'insegnamento è un campo pratico, in cui si prova a compiere varie imprese contemporaneamente. In un mondo ideale, un insegnante si propone di lavorare con i giovani, per informare, incoraggiare, istruire, sviluppare, prendersi cura, disciplinare, formare, instillare, impartire, ispirare, illuminare, sostenere e familiarizzare. Con le aspettative riposte negli insegnanti da parte delle istituzioni statali, c'è anche una buona dose di informazioni e competenze specifiche che gli studenti dovrebbero apprendere e acquisire. Nel tentativo di definire, spiegare e soddisfare queste aspettative nel campo della letteratura inglese e in particolare delle opere di William Shakespeare, le ricerche e le pubblicazioni del settore non si dimostrano all'altezza. Gli insegnanti hanno bisogno di un'assistenza che dovrebbe essere accessibile, completa e chiara per essere efficace. Le informazioni disponibili sono sparse all'interno di una vasta gamma di discipline e prospettive, coprono diverse modalità e sono sistematicamente frammentarie e a volte contraddittorie, inoltre in pochi casi affrontano i molteplici punti critici dell'insegnare Shakespeare a scuola. Infine, l'elemento probabilmente più rilevante riguarda la quasi totale assenza di ricerca sugli effetti che i cambiamenti del recente passato hanno avuto sul nostro mondo, scuotendo la stabilità dell'ambiente scuola.

Uno dei fattori più importanti che ha contribuito a questa sfida negli ultimi anni è lo sviluppo delle *digital humanities*, che hanno riconosciuto la necessità e l'utilità di integrare le competenze e i mezzi digitali nel programma di letteratura inglese. Negli ultimi trent'anni si è discusso in maniera significativa proprio sulla possibilità di tradurre tutto ciò in pratica e gli obiettivi integrati in questo approccio sono stati catapultati in prima linea nella formazione degli insegnanti con l'inizio della pandemia di Covid-19. La scuola non è più la stessa di prima del 2020 ed è lecito

chiedersi come si può inserire Shakespeare all'interno di questa nuova aula digitale. Gli insegnanti devono confrontarsi su come presentare le opere utilizzando i mezzi e gli strumenti a loro disposizione, sfruttando quanto si trova online e gestendo le lezioni per riuscire a districarsi fra i limiti imposti dalla pandemia. Ciò che si potrebbe percepire come una sfida, può invece essere concepita come un'opportunità. Negli ultimi due anni non c'è stato tempo da perdere, gli insegnanti sono dovuti intervenire su tutto ciò che le *digital humanities* stanno promuovendo da anni e hanno dovuto rinnovare il loro metodo di insegnamento. I docenti non dovrebbero essere lasciati soli in questo passaggio, dovrebbero essere le istituzioni ad adottare un approccio affidabile, strutturato e produttivo nei confronti della formazione digitale di coloro che vogliono diventare insegnanti e di coloro che già lo sono.

Le modalità usate per lavorare con Shakespeare a scuola devono pertanto essere nuovamente adattate affinché possano inserirsi nelle condizioni attuali dell'ambiente educativo, che sono drasticamente cambiate. Nel contesto italiano, come nella maggior parte dei paesi in cui si studia Shakespeare, è necessario sviluppare approcci adatti a far fronte alla grande varietà di prospettive culturali che rientrano nelle sue opere, nonché alle accresciute difficoltà linguistiche che si possono incontrare durante il percorso di studio: alla luce di tutto ciò, si può fare molto per migliorare.

Uno sguardo onesto alla situazione odierna dei percorsi di letteratura inglese nella scuola secondaria italiana porta alla luce le sfide di cui si occupano studenti e insegnanti e il potenziale che potrebbe offrire un approccio corretto allo studio di Shakespeare. Una volta chiariti opportunità e limiti, è possibile definire tale

approccio e soprattutto chiarire quale ruolo deve avere Shakespeare nel percorso didattico, basandosi sulle caratteristiche e sui bisogni degli studenti di oggi. Questo lavoro mira a raggiungere tale obiettivo, esaminando la situazione attuale della didattica di Shakespeare all'interno dei corsi di letteratura inglese negli istituti superiori nel mondo, sia in classi anglofone che in classi in cui l'inglese è studiato come lingua seconda. Al fine di analizzare al meglio una strategia didattica, si sono considerate le forti influenze che la pandemia mondiale ha avuto nel campo dell'insegnamento. Questa ricerca ha portato a un approccio chiaro e pragmatico che è saldamente radicato nel ricco bagaglio delle pubblicazioni esistenti, senza perdere mai di vista il futuro della didattica della letteratura. Si sono pertanto tenuti in considerazione il punto di partenza attuale e il punto verso cui si vuole arrivare quando si parla di Shakespeare in classe, senza tralasciare come si è lavorato finora.

Il punto di partenza è l'analisi delle teorie letterarie al fine di identificare l'approccio più valido per i giovani in classe, evidenziando un obiettivo finale per gli studenti. A seguire, si è considerato come la presenza di Shakespeare in classe sia cambiata con l'avvio dell'epoca delle *digital humanities*, inserendo tale evoluzione all'interno delle attuali esigenze delle classi influenzate dai drastici cambiamenti causati dalla pandemia di Covid-19. Si sono poi delineate le nuove aspettative e possibilità per gli insegnanti di oggi e sono state presentate proposte specifiche e alcuni vantaggi derivanti dallo studio delle opere shakespeariane. Sono stati presi in considerazione gli studenti di inglese lingua seconda nella scuola secondaria, che rappresentano ad oggi la netta maggioranza di coloro che studiano Shakespeare.

I capitoli successivi si concentrano sulla sfida rappresentata dall'insegnare Shakespeare e su quale sia un approccio flessibile che risponda alle esigenze dei tre fattori in campo: l'era digitale, gli studenti di inglese come lingua seconda e gli studenti della scuola secondaria travolti dalla pandemia. Il lavoro si focalizza sulla messa in pratica della teoria, delineando il ruolo degli insegnanti e i benefici per gli studenti. Non si è tralasciato di segnalare dove sia possibile inserire la drammatizzazione in classe e quale sia lo stato attuale dell'ambiente classe, cercando di trasmettere agli studenti un senso di responsabilità per lo sviluppo personale all'interno del proprio percorso scolastico. Sono state analizzate le teorie dell'apprendimento della lingua inglese come valido strumento nello studio di Shakespeare, per riflettere sulla lingua attraverso i testi studiati e imparare a gestire la lingua stessa all'interno delle lezioni. Nella pletora di suggerimenti su come lavorare sui testi più difficili, sono stati delineati gli strumenti più adatti, che a loro volta portano a soffermarsi non solo sul contenuto ma anche sulla forma usata per presentarlo. Infine, si è definito il ruolo di insegnanti e studenti nella classe di oggi, per tenere presente gli obiettivi finali dell'insegnamento della letteratura.

L'approccio presentato è stato testato su un gruppo di studenti di tre diverse classi al terzo anno della scuola secondaria di primo grado con l'obiettivo di individuare i punti di forza del metodo didattico proposto e isolare così eventuali punti deboli da correggere, al fine di giungere a un approccio collaudato che i docenti possono scegliere di attuare in parte o integralmente. Il progetto si è svolto nell'arco di sei settimane ed ha riguardato una specifica opera di Shakespeare: *Romeo e Giulietta*. Lo studio ha previsto una parte teorica e una pratica, culminate nella rappresentazione da parte degli studenti di alcune parti di una determinata scena. Per ottenere delle conclusioni più complete, è stato raccolto e registrato il

feedback degli studenti, con osservazioni sull'efficacia del metodo utilizzato e suggerimenti per un suo miglioramento. Poiché lo scopo di questo lavoro è di elaborare una proposta concreta che gli insegnanti possano applicare in classe quando insegnano Shakespeare, la parte finale dell'indagine è considerata della massima importanza, essendo l'unico modo per trasferire questo elaborato dalla sfera della teoria ad un'applicazione al mondo pratico all'interno delle lezioni di letteratura inglese. Insegnare Shakespeare agli adolescenti non è un compito facile, ma questo studio avanza un approccio chiaro e comprovato con cui poter iniziare.