
It's Called Macbeth You Idiot

Using Classic Texts in the EFL Classroom

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Introduction

The teaching of literature in English language classes is an issue that can draw mixed reactions from English language teachers.

Fitch O'Connell (2009) recently summarized some arguments often cited for *not* using English literature in language classes. One of those arguments was the belief that English literature teaching required a zealous adherence to canonised classic texts.

In arguing his case *for* the teaching of literature, O'Connell quite rightly affirms that literature used in classrooms can be “brief, contemporary and relevant” (p. 1). The literature texts included in the ‘Britlit’ section of the British Council’s ‘Teaching English’ website reflects this ethos. This literature is mainly contemporary short stories such as Beryl Bainbridge’s black comedy *Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie* and Fay Weldon’s *Weekend*. The novels included are both based on recent films with strong young adult appeal; *Billy Elliot* by Melvin Burgess & *Bend it like Beckham* by Narinder Dhami.

Peter Francis and Mary Thomas (2010) echo this support for the use of more contemporary young adult literature in ‘English as a Foreign Language’ (EFL) classrooms. They cite Reed (1994) in asserting that most young adults prefer to read texts written specifically for a young adult audience and featuring young adult characters dealing with young adult issues. As a writer of young adult fiction and a regular observer of young adult readers, I thoroughly agree.

The above examples highlight the fact that the trend towards using more literature in EFL classrooms has been largely based on what John McRae (1994) describes as small ‘l’ literature. This more ‘popular’ or ‘everyday’ type of literature is characterized as being in opposition to large ‘L’ literature, which is the classic literature of the English canon. Such dichotomies are often dangerous as they can encourage a simplified form of thinking. “Small ‘l’ good; Large ‘L’ bad!” My advocacy for the use of more large ‘L’ or classic literature is an attempt to challenge some of the negative thinking around the use of classic literature in EFL classrooms.

Classic literature if used appropriately can be a very useful resource for EFL teachers.

The approaches to using classic literature that I have outlined below come from my teaching experiences in multicultural Australian classrooms containing ‘English as a Second Language’ (ESL) students. The two classic writers I have chosen to focus on are William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens.

William Shakespeare

I used William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* with my very first English class in the early eighties and it proved to be a serendipitous choice. The way this unit of work on *Macbeth* evolved was also a good example of how following a positive class energy can be more rewarding than following a carefully considered program.

My class was a mixture of Anglo-Celtic, Italian and Greek Australians who were very unprepared for me or the eleventh century mayhem of *Macbeth*.

My first challenge, once we had collected the dog-eared copies of *Macbeth* from the library, was getting three year eight girls to volunteer to be witches. In the end, I was required to be a witch myself and recall being the only one to read out the lines designated, "All" or to cackle, as anyone knows a good witch should. Geographical issues such as, why the "desert place" was not really a "desert" and what a "blasted heath" might look like, also seemed determined to derail my lesson.

There were five minutes left and I was considering an early recess when one of the boys in the back row suggested that we read scene two and that he be King Duncan. I was willing to try anything and we quickly divvied up the parts. As it was almost recess, I volunteered to be the sergeant and pointed theatrically to King Duncan to start.

He pointed at me (the wounded sergeant) and yelled, “What bloody man is that?” The class howled their appreciation and we continued scene two to the point where the sergeant describes how Macbeth “unseams” the “merciless Macdonwald ... from the nave to the chaps”. I demonstrated this action in graphic detail. I was developing an instinct for which parts of the story might appeal to my students.

The siren finally sounded and the class streamed out the door, happy with the lesson they had just experienced despite the fact that the first ninety percent of it had been an uncomfortable failure. The ten percent that had worked inspired me to go home that evening and begin rewriting the play in more modern, plain language.

By the end of the week, the students were bringing in costumes for the various roles. Grannies old stole for King Duncan, a younger sister’s tiara for Lady Macbeth, an old volleyball on which we could paint Macbeth’s decapitated head.

Thanks to my students and to what LeCornu and Peters (2005) describe as my ‘responsive interaction style’ (p. 58). *Macbeth* was a hit!

My approach in these lessons was simple:

- Summarize the plot (Again and again!)
- Recap on the previous lessons reading
- Continue reading from the simplified scripts

Occasionally I would highlight a more significant example of Shakespeare's original dialogue especially if it contained passages that were particularly famous or phrases that remained in modern usage. As we read the play I discovered that one of the keys to my students engagement in the text (apart from dressing up and acting out horrific battle scenes) was my ability as a teacher to relate the themes of the play to issues that were important to them in their lives as young adults. The influence of other people on their behaviour and decision-making, especially peer group pressure, is a huge theme in the lives of young adults and my class found this aspect of *Macbeth* particularly engaging once the parallels with their own experience were made obvious.

Another approach that proved very successful was getting students to imagine modern situations where the same plot and themes could be played out. A favourite activity became the adaptation of the story to a modern school situation. This approach culminated many years later in the writing of my own young adult adaptation of *Macbeth*, called *Macbeth, You Idiot!* (2009). Unlike the original *Macbeth* which was written for seventeenth century theatre goers and has adult characters in adult situations I wrote this adaptation with a young adult audience in mind and used young adult characters in typical young adult situations. It therefore conforms to Reed's criteria for a book with young adult appeal. The novel follows the fortunes of Andy Macbeth, a boy who has just started high school at Scotts College. He becomes a star player in the school football team and is instrumental in winning the first match. His three weird, socialite aunts fawn over him and tell him that he could be captain and even coach of the team if he put his mind to it. His hot new girlfriend, Fifi Lamour, agrees and she encourages

him to be more ruthless in achieving his goals. Macbeth then embarks on a power trip that we all know will end badly.

Humour has a universal appeal for young adults and it is used throughout the novel. It starts with the title, which is also a good example in how meaning can be changed by shifting stress from one word to another or by the use of punctuation.

My main reason for writing *Macbeth, You Idiot!* was to provide an entry point to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* for a wider audience. I was especially thinking about the needs of ESL and EFL students. My intention was that *Macbeth, You Idiot!* could be used as either a preparatory or an alternative text for the teaching of Shakespeare's original *Macbeth*.

Adapting my teaching strategies for *Macbeth* was driven by my survival instincts, but in doing so, I had stumbled into a constructivist approach to teaching. Constructivism, which stems from the work of Jean Piaget, is a psychological theory of knowledge, often referred to in discussions of pedagogy. By simplifying the language in my first classes, and by setting my later version of *Macbeth* in an environment that was already known to the learners and, therefore, more consistent with their internal representations of the world, I have made it more likely that they will assimilate the new experience presented by the text. If readers of *Macbeth, You Idiot!* study the Shakespearian version later they will similarly be better placed to assimilate the experience as they already have a sound knowledge of plot, characterization and theme. This approach contrasts to the traditional reading (in the original) and analysis model, which is often shackled to the

presentation of Shakespeare as a cultural artifact and a test of students' cultural intelligence. In terms of social constructivist thinking, the problem with that approach is that most of the students, especially ESL/EFL students, are being asked to perform way above what Vygotsky calls their 'zone of proximal development'. (Vygotsky, 1978) Simply put, it is too hard.

I discovered through *Macbeth* that if I applied a social constructivist approach to the teaching of classic texts from the English canon they could engage all of my students in successful learning. This approach involved recognizing the uniqueness of each learner and using this as the starting point rather than the birth of William Shakespeare in 1564. If students do not see what is happening in *Macbeth* as being representative of *their world* they will not connect with the text.

The two keys to making *Macbeth* accessible and enjoyable for my students were:

- Relevance - showing how the text related to their lives
- Scaffolding - bridging the language/knowledge gap

Charles Dickens

At the same that I was working on these approaches to *Macbeth*, I was also thinking about inclusive ways that I could incorporate more of the work of Charles Dickens into my teaching. Writing a contemporary adaptation was a very time consuming exercise and I looked around for other ideas.

My favourite Dickens' novels as a young adult were *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*. They were both classic bildungsroman novels. A bildungsroman is a novel that follows a protagonist's life from birth through to maturity. Along the way, they need to overcome some adversity and this acts as a catalyst in their development. At the start of these novels, the focus is on the protagonist as a young adult and the sorts of influences and developing habits of mind that will be crucial in the playing out of their lives. In this regard, these early chapters conform to the characteristics of a good young adult novel referred to earlier. They contain young adult characters dealing with young adult issues. I would further contend that Dickens had the younger part of his audience firmly in mind when he wrote these chapters.

Young people read the early pages of *Great Expectation*, in a way that is different to an older reader. I can still vividly recall reading chapter one of *Great Expectations* as a young adult. This chapter is a wonderful piece of writing that captures the perspective of a young person brilliantly. The description of Magwitch holding and controlling Pip so completely and his resultant terror is palpable for a young reader. So too is the pervading sense of a young boy about to set sail into life and being more than a little scared by that prospect.

Therefore, when I was lamenting the fact many years later that I could not use *Great Expectations* in the vast majority of my English classes it occurred to me that maybe I should just use the part that spoke to me most poignantly when I was the same age as my students.

I applied the same constructivist thinking to Dickens that I had earlier applied to Shakespeare. The first issue was **relevance**. Our school had a strong focus on personal identity so I decided to get the students writing about their earliest memories. This *before* activity provided a meaningful context for the reading of the first chapter of *Great Expectations*.

The second issue was **scaffolding**. My students needed to become familiar with nineteenth century England. Fortunately, I was using an integrated approach to the teaching of English and Humanities and in Australian history at that level, we were covering the early forced migration of convicts to Australia from 1788. There was an obvious connection between this historical study and Magwitch, the escaped convict, who terrifies Pip in the first chapter of *Great Expectations*. Therefore, before starting the novel my students gained an understanding of early nineteenth century English history. They focused especially on the harsh conditions and high crime rate in England at this time and the measures in place to manage this, such as the use of hulks for incarceration and transportation to Australia. This background knowledge enabled them to connect with the era and circumstances of the novel.

I read only the first chapter of *Great Expectations*. For some classes I abbreviate this even further and read the first chapter of an abridged version. The remainder of the story I show through David Lean's brilliant 1946 film adaptation.

I use a different approach, however with *David Copperfield*. In using this text, I focus on the Hablot Browne (Phiz) illustrations, which accompanied the first

serialization of the book in 1849-50. It occurred to me that the thing that had drawn me to battered Dickens' hardbacks when I was a young adult had been the illustrations. I decided therefore to use the illustrations in Dickens to tell the story interactively with the class.

Over time, I also developed a shorter unit of work on *David Copperfield* based on 'good' and 'bad' places. My *before* activity for this unit is to get students to write descriptions of a 'favourite place'. This activity makes the illustrations and passages that follow more **relevant** to them.

I **scaffold** this activity by again ensuring that students have an understanding of this period in English history and I display a map of England to show the location of Yarmouth which is the setting for the illustration they are about to see. The class then studies the illustration (below) showing David Copperfield's arrival at Mr Peggotty's house. (This house is a converted boat that rests above the high water mark on the beach at Yarmouth.)



I am hospitably received by Mr Peggotty

Figure 1: I am hospitably received by Mr Peggotty¹

I then ask the class whether they feel Mr Peggotty's will be a 'good' or 'bad' place.

My experience is that young adults read illustrations much better than I do and they generally point out:

- David Copperfield's location near the centre of the illustration

¹ *I am hospitably received by Mr Peggotty* by Phiz (Hablot K. Browne). May 1849. Steel etching. Illustration for Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* Source: Centenary Edition (1911), volume one. Image scan and text by Philip V. Allingham.

- Mr Peggotty's kind expression
- The familiar household objects
- Etc.

Students always conclude correctly that this is a 'good' place and this leads to a discussion of the advantages of the simple rural life over life in urban areas, which is a common theme in Dickens' writing. The colloquial language used by Peggotty in the written passage that accompanies this illustration can also act as a stimulus for the discussion of this aspect of language.² I then show the students a second illustration from *David Copperfield*, which shows a 'bad' place.



Figure 2: The River³

² See Appendix 1 for questions/exercises for this passage.

³ *The River* by Phiz (Halbot K. Browne). Illustration for Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, 1850. Etching. Source: Steig, plate 82. . Image scan and text by Philip V. Allingham.

This illustration shows the banks of the Thames in London, in the midst of the bleakest stage of the industrial revolution. The class studies the illustration and records the aspects that make this seem a ‘bad’ place.

I then read the passage describing this scene to the class:

The neighbourhood was a dreary one at that time; as oppressive, sad, and solitary by night, as any about London. There were neither wharves nor houses on the melancholy waste of road near the great blank Prison. A sluggish ditch deposited its mud at the prison walls. Coarse grass and rank weeds straggled over all the marshy land in the vicinity. In one part, carcasses of houses, inauspiciously begun and never finished, rotted away. In another, the ground was cumbered with rusty iron monsters of steam-boilers, wheels, cranks, pipes, furnaces, paddles, anchors, diving-bells, windmill-sails, and I know not what strange objects, accumulated by some speculator, and grovelling in the dust, underneath which - having sunk into the soil of their own weight in wet weather - they had the appearance of vainly trying to hide themselves. The clash and glare of sundry fiery Works upon the river-side, arose by night to disturb everything except the heavy and unbroken smoke that poured out of their chimneys. Slimy gaps and causeways, winding among old wooden piles, with a sickly substance clinging to the latter, like green hair, and the rags of last year's handbills offering rewards for drowned men fluttering above high-water mark, led down through the ooze and slush to the ebb-tide. There was a story that one of the pits dug for the dead in the time of the Great Plague was hereabout; and a blighting influence seemed to have proceeded from it over the whole place. Or else it looked as if it had gradually decomposed into that nightmare condition, out of the overflowings of the polluted stream.

As if she were a part of the refuse it had cast out, and left to corruption and decay, the girl we had followed strayed down to the river's brink, and stood in the midst of this night-picture, lonely and still, looking at the water. (Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, 2007, pp. 555-556)⁴

⁴ See Appendix 2 for questions/exercises for this passage.

My classes gain a greater sense of the kind of social conditions that were breeding crime and encouraging the migration of free settlers to Australia in the early eighteenth century, from this passage than they do from history text books. We then discuss the techniques used in the writing to develop a sense of a ‘bad’ place and this provides a lead in to a lesson on adjectives and later inspires some great descriptive writing from the students. The language level of the above passage may be challenging for some EFL students but the passage can be studied over an extended period or even abbreviated.

I photocopy the illustrations I use onto cards and laminate them, as I find that today’s students are often overexposed to images on a screen and they work better if they have their own copy of the illustration in their hands for the lesson. There are also many other classic texts that have been illustrated and these can be used in the same way. I am currently devising a unit based on the Sidney Edward Paget illustrations of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s, Sherlock Holmes stories.

More recently, I have concluded my studies of *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield* by comparing their themes to a modern film version of the bildungsroman in *Slumdog Millionaire*. This further connects the themes in the Dickens’ novels to the contemporary world of my students as *Slumdog Millionaire* also looks at disadvantaged young people struggling to make their way in society during a period of social change. In Dickens, the period of social

change is the industrial revolution whereas in *Slumdog Millionaire* it is globalization. These large themes provide a healthy stimulus for robust class discussion.

Conclusion

I have used classic texts in the ways discussed above because I have felt passionate about them and they have proven to be very engaging for the classes I have taught. I will conclude however, by briefly discussing some further points in their favour.

The first of these is the extent to which these classic texts are embedded in popular culture. The large number of film adaptations that keep appearing based on these texts highlights this aspect. (The filming in 2010 of a new adaptation of *David Copperfield* with Rowan Atkinson in the role of Wilkins Micawber is an immediate example of this. No doubt the release of this film is set to coincide with the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Dickens in 2012.) In this respect, these classic texts tend to confer more cultural capital than less well-known literature. These film adaptations also provide further material for English language teachers.

Secondly, the very fact that students are studying an iconic work of literature endows a sense of affirmation. Learners generally feel better about engaging in something that is widely acclaimed to be important.

Finally, classic texts have become so for a reason. They contain some of the most beautiful examples of the use of the English language. For this reason alone, they are a worthwhile addition to an English language teacher's resources.

The study of classic texts in engaging ways allows students to develop their language skill while at the same time gaining an understanding of some of the cultural icons of the language they are learning. If students become inspired to read more of these classic works of literature in the process; all the better!

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Appendix 1: Responses to the written passage for, 'I am hospitably received by Mr Peggotty'

'Yon's our house, Mas'r Davy!'

I looked in all directions, as far as I could stare over the wilderness, and away at the sea, and away at the river, but no house could I make out. There was a black barge, or some other kind of superannuated boat, not far off, high and dry on the ground, with an iron funnel sticking out of it for a chimney and smoking very cosily; but nothing else in the way of a habitation that was visible to me.

'That's not it?' said I. 'That ship-looking thing?'

'That's it, Mas'r Davy,' returned Ham.

If it had been Aladdin's palace, roc's egg and all, I suppose I could not have been more charmed with the romantic idea of living in it. There was a delightful door cut in the side, and it was roofed in, and there were little windows in it; but the wonderful charm of it was, that it was a real boat which had no doubt been upon the water hundreds of times, and which had never been intended to be lived in, on dry land. That was the captivation of it to me. If it had ever been meant to be lived in, I might have thought it small, or inconvenient, or lonely; but never having been designed for any such use, it became a perfect abode...

(Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, 2007, pp. 35-36)

After reading this passage we focus on the aspects of the passage which most contribute to developing a sense of Peggotty's boat being a good place. Below are questions/exercises that students complete in response to this passage:

1. Underline or highlight words that give a sense of how DC is feeling about this place.
2. Underline or highlight any words that are unfamiliar and find their meaning.
3. What is your immediate impression of the first speaker? Elaborate.
4. How does Dicken describe the smoke? Describe the smoke in a way that creates a completely different atmosphere.
5. How did David Copperfield feel about the idea of living in the boat and what factor/s contributed to this feeling?

Appendix 2: Responses to the written passage for ‘The River’:

1. Underline or highlight words that give a sense of how David Copperfield is feeling about this place.
2. Underline or highlight any words that are unfamiliar and find their meaning.
3. What impression do you get of the woman and her possible motives from the first paragraph?
4. Why do you think the “glimpse of the river” in the second paragraph “seemed to arrest (DC’s) feet”?
5. How does Dickens describe the smoke in this passage and how does this contribute to the mood?
6. Describe your own ‘bad place’.