

***Teaching Classics to EFL Students
is Teaching them Latin***

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Abstract

The present paper entitled 'Teaching Classics to EFL Students is Teaching them Latin' is an attempt to redraw the boundaries of literary studies in EFL Departments. The teaching of literature has always adopted a diachronic approach, i.e. from the Norman-French period to the Victorian era. Yet, many of the literary texts studied in the English language curriculum provide outdated contexts and obscure expressions which fall far outside the range of any literary use of language. In the light of such an assertion, which is actually backed up by many teachers and students alike, we are to deal with the linguistic usefulness and sociolinguistic validity of literary works that were written centuries ago. That would lead us to say that 'much water has flowed under the bridge since then'. This is another way of questioning the place of classic literature in an educational context in which Modern Standard English has imposed itself as the sole medium of instruction and communication between native and non-native speakers of English. The answer to that question forms the general lay-out of the present paper.

Well you may all wonder why we have chosen such a thought-provoking title, and you may also all wonder what is the type or what is the nature of the message we'd like to convey through such a title. Or, in other words, how come we relate classics to Latin. The answer to these questions forms the general lay-out of this paper. But before we launch into the discussion properly speaking, we think that the term *classics*

needs to be defined and explained. Well to avoid any form of misinterpretation and misunderstanding, the word *classics* is used here in a very inclusive sense and as an umbrella or cover term to include all literary works that are not written in plain English, i.e. in the type of English that is intelligible to all native and non-native speakers of English throughout the world. And that type is what linguists, sociolinguists and EFL teachers call Modern Standard English, or MSE for short.

In gross, we include in this class category the pre-renaissance writer, the father of English poetry Chaucer, the famous renaissance playwright William Shakespeare and the seventeenth century writers such as Alexander Pope, Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift, to mention just a few. As you can see, the common denominator, to use a mathematical terminology, between the aforementioned writers, is their use of, what we call in philological studies Elizabethan English. But our point of focus will be on Shakespeare's style, though he is regarded in world literature in general and British literature in particular as a peerless author and one of the outstanding names in human art. That's the way we give credit to Shakespeare's genius.

Having explained the first headword of the title, now we move on to explain the second headword of the title and obviously we refer to Latin. From a linguist standpoint, Latin, is a standard language, standard in the sense that it ***“possesses an agreed set of codified norms which are accepted by the speech community and form the basis of formal teaching of the language.”*** That's the way Steward has defined the attribute of standardization in both his 1962 and 1968 models (for more details see Bell 1978).

However, from the sociolinguistic standpoint, the Latin language lacks the attribute of vitality, in other words, ***“the degree to which a variety has ... interaction networks that actually employ it natively for***

one or more essential functions". That's the way Fishman has defined the attribute of vitality in his book *Advances in the Sociology of Language* (1971). This another of saying that Latin, which used to be the European language in the Middle Ages, falls under the sociolinguistic label of a dead language. Now we think that things are getting clearer and the relationship between classics and Latin has been clearly explained. This would lead us, by analogy to what we've said, that we can assume that classic literature is as dead as Latin.

To back up our assumption, there are plenty of things to say about Shakespeare's style. As a case in point, as EFL students as we were and EFL teachers as we are, we've always wondered about the learning and the teaching of Shakespeare's plays at the graduate level, bearing in mind that the type of English style used by our playwright does not reflect faithfully the norms of *usage* the English language has developed, and we deliberately use the term *usage* in the sense used by classical grammarians, i.e. in a normative and prescriptive way.

So, prescriptively speaking, freed of many of the conventions and rules underlying the "bon usage" of the English language, to borrow an expression used by Claude Favre de Vaugelas, an esteemed member of the Académie Française, Shakespeare had shaped vocabulary and syntax to the demands of his style. He interchanged the various parts of speech, using nouns as adjectives or verbs, adjectives as adverbs and pronouns as nouns. That's what a literary critic has noted about Shakespeare's use of English.

In his *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, the weaver Bottom speaks in prose to the fairy queen Titania. Though such freedom or talent gave his language an extraordinary plasticity, this plasticity, masterminded and beautiful use of the language, still represents the major difficulties in reading, understanding and therefore appreciating Shakespeare's works or plays. So, one of our academic claims is what is

the usefulness of studying a literary work, though it is regarded by many literary critics, as a masterpiece. We feel a bit embarrassed, one should admit, to say that in terms of linguistic enrichment, it represents nothing but a set of archaic, outdated words and expressions utterly devoid of functional value. In very down-to-earth terms and pragmatically speaking, language is what people say at present, not what used to be said five or six centuries ago.

To our opinion, to devote whole sessions to Shakespeare and the like at the graduation level is sheer waste of time. Knowledge about the Shakespeare may be beneficial in its right; this does not necessarily determine its place, or determine that it has a place in an EFL course. In informal discussions with students, most of them admit that studying Shakespeare's plays is an extremely and difficult task. Some students take this step further by daring to that Shakespeare and the like "is all Chinese to me" Isn't that a very illustrative example of the difficulties characterising classics? This literature is more appropriate to be studied as part of a Magister specialism.

At the postgraduate level, Shakespeare's English is worth studying as a part of comparative philology module to show the linguistic changes between Middle English and Modern Standard English, and how the latter has evolved from the former. So we think it's high time, we proposed changes in the programme and consequently adjust synchronically our teaching to the requirements to the present situation. When it comes to an EFL teaching or learning context, as the adage has it, "It all boils down to language." To conclude we dare any EFL teacher to fully understand, linguistically speaking, Shakespeare's language; let alone the literary dimension.

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