



Shakespearean Language Activity

Activity Description & Purpose

Since many students are intimidated by Shakespeare's plays, it is important to face their fears at the very start of the unit. The purpose of this activity is to allow students to become familiar with Shakespeare's language in a non-threatening way in order to dispel their concerns before reading.

1. I always begin the unit by asking students if they like Shakespeare. Most say that they don't, so we then discuss their reasons for disliking Shakespeare. It is no surprise that most students dislike Shakespeare's plays because the language is difficult.
2. As a result, I always follow this discussion with a note-taking session about Shakespeare's language. I make sure to point out to them that the items on this list (e.g. inverted word order, rhyme scheme, old words, etc.) are the very reasons that they expressed dislike for Shakespeare. Then I explain how/why Shakespeare uses this language.
3. Once the issue of Shakespeare's language is demystified, students are more willing to try to understand it. To help familiarize them with the sound of Shakespeare's language, I hand each student an index card containing one quotation from the play. I ask the students to read the quotation to themselves. While they read, I walk around the room and answer pronunciation questions. After they have had a few minutes to read their cards, I ask them to take turns reading their cards to the person sitting next to them.

Finally, I tell them to find a partner on the other side of the room and take turns reading their cards. After each partner has read her card, they must trade cards before finding another partner. I let them circulate around the room for about eight to ten minutes so that they are exposed to several quotations from the play.

4. By this time, students have achieved a certain level of comfort with Shakespeare's language. The next step is to show them that figuring out Shakespeare's meaning is a bit like taking a puzzle apart and switching the pieces around. I illustrate this by dividing them into groups of about four or five students. I hand each group a stack of index cards. One word of a quote from the play is printed on each card. Students are asked to put the words into an order that makes sense. The object is NOT to try to figure out how Shakespeare said it, but to make sense of the words themselves. (Tip: Since each group is given a different quotation, there is always the chance that the cards will get mixed up. I use colored index cards and markers to help differentiate which set of cards is which.)

Once the groups are happy with their versions of the quotations, I ask them to write their sentences on a transparency. When everyone has finished, the groups present their results. After each group has shared their versions of the quotations, I show them the real one and compare the two. (Tip: To get the kids more involved, I read their quotes and Shakespeare's with a grand flourish. I also use this activity as a means of introducing the play itself. I select one quotation from each act, and explain it in context as we compare the students' versions to the real ones.)

Enrichment & Home School Use

This lesson plan was originally designed for use in a classroom setting consisting of approximately 27 to 29 students; however, the assignment can easily be adapted for smaller classrooms and for home school use.

While it is helpful to complete this activity with at least one other student, it can be equally as effective if the teacher and student work together. In the case of small groups or individual students, I would suggest using several quotations for added exposure.