

## Relevance of Shakespeare's Works among English Language Major Students

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### ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare's literary works are considered to be the among the most important works in English Literature. However, his works which were produced about four centuries ago in Elizabethan English causes his works to be almost incomprehensible among modern readers. Therefore, this study aims to find out whether or not students who study the English language are familiar with Shakespeare's works and what their sentiments are towards the works by William Shakespeare. This study utilizes quantitative methodology and questionnaire is used as the instrument to collect data. Thirty (30) samples were collected among students of English Language Studies programmes (ELS). The analyzed data will tell us whether or not the students are familiar with Shakespeare's works and what their sentiments are towards the works.

*Keywords: Relevance, Shakespeare's Works, English Language Major Students*

### INTRODUCTION

Concerning reading Shakespeare's language, Mowat & Werstine (2013) say that:

*For many people today, reading Shakespeare's language can be a problem-but it is a problem that can be solved. Those who have studied Latin (or even French or German or Spanish) and those who are used to reading poetry will have little difficulty understanding the language of poetic drama. Others, however, need to develop the skills of untangling unusual sentence structures and of recognizing and understanding poetic compressions, omissions, and wordplay. And even those skilled in reading unusual sentence structures may have occasional trouble with Shakespeare's words. More than four hundred years of "static" – caused by changes in language and in life – intervene between his speaking and our hearing. Most of his vocabulary is still in use, but a few of his words are no longer used, and many of his words now have meanings quite different from those they had in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.*

When Oregon Shakespeare Festival announced it would commission Modern-English “translations” of all of Shakespeare’s plays, Professor John H. McWhorter, a linguistics professor at Columbia University wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* to defend the idea of modernizing Shakespeare. Although he admits that this will cause the works to lose some structural details, and rhythm, he questions what is it that people want? Professor McWhorter says, “Do you want to listen to an English that we really can no longer take in without being scholars who are spending the kind of time that most of us ... don’t really have time for? Or we sacrifice some of that detail, some of that exquisiteness, so that we can get, say 95 percent of what the man meant. I want us to really connect with Shakespeare instead of genuflecting, which is what I think most of us really do” (Shockman, 2015).

In an article by Massey (2015) titled ‘Is Shakespeare Too Difficult for Modern audiences?’, the author opines that yes if ‘modern readers’ who are referred to in the article’s title anyone without a BA in English Literature or a natural taste for Shakespeare’s plays. Professor Shapiro when arguing about the move of Oregon Shakespeare Festival to translate all of Shakespeare’s plays into modern English and the commitment of other companies to produce these versions, does concede that some of Shakespeare’s language is “difficult” but argues that the fault lies not in Shakespeare instead the actors and directors who “too frequently offer up Shakespeare’s plays without themselves having a firm enough grasp of what his words mean.”

In discussing whether or not Shakespeare is still relevant, Somersett (2016) relates that, “Some people, especially young students, consider the study of Shakespearean plays to be an old fashioned, outdated idea that bears little relevance to their own lives. The language can appear almost foreign, and initial readings can leave the student feeling confused and unsure of what is actually being said. However, the themes explored in Shakespearean plays are as relevant in 2016 as they were in the 16th and 17th century.” Somersett continues that, “If you don’t understand Shakespeare, it is easy to dismiss his work as irrelevant in modern times. However, Shakespearean plays are as meaningful now as they ever were, because human nature has not changed.”

After looking at all these arguments, therefore, this study aims at fulfilling the following objectives:

1. To find out whether or not students who study the English language are familiar with Shakespeare’s life and works.
2. To investigate what the students’ sentiments are towards the works of William Shakespeare.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Shakespeare’s life, career and works**

According to Mowat & Werstine (2013), William Shakespeare was born in April 1564 and died in April 1616. Evidences from surviving documents show that Shakespeare was a playwright, poet, actor and owner of a theater company who grew up in the market town of Stratford-upon-Avon, spent a professional career in London, and returned to Stratford a wealthy landowner.

Shakespeare’s poems and plays are proofs of his wide reading and of his knowledge of Virgil, Ovid, Plutarch, Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, and the Bible as well as his mastery of the English language. Since there are no surviving records about his education, it can only be speculated based on his great knowledge of language and literature that Shakespeare attended

the English “grammar school” in his hometown Stratford-upon-Avon, where the students were primarily educated in Latin grammar and literature.

By 1592 in London, Shakespeare had achieved some prominence as an actor and a playwright. While, in 1593 he became a published poet when his long narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* was published. In 1594, another poem of his was published called *The Rape of Lucrece*. Both of these poems were dedicated to the young earl of Southampton (Henry Wriothesley), who may have become Shakespeare’s patron.

After the theaters reopened in 1594 (the theaters were closed due to the plague that devastated the population in London), Shakespeare continued his double career of actor and playwright. Records show that he was a member of Lord Chamberlain’s Men (later named King’s men, for whom he would be a principal actor, dramatist and shareholder). In 1599, Shakespeare’s company built a theater for themselves called the Globe where Shakespeare wrote what are considered by many to be his major tragedies namely *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* as well as comedies such as *Twelfth Night* and *Measure for Measure*. Between 1599 and 1608, Shakespeare wrote several plays among others *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest* presumably for the company’s new indoor Blackfriar’s theater. Shakespeare wrote very little after 1612. 1613 was the year when he probably wrote King Henry VIII.

Shakespeare’s career spanned about two decades. In the 1590’s, he wrote his plays on English history, several comedies and at least two tragedies i.e. *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet*. These histories, comedies and tragedies are the plays credited to him in 1598 in a work called *Palladis Tamia*. It is also assumed that many of Shakespeare’s sonnets, which were not published until 1609, were also written in the 1590’s. Seven years after Shakespeare’s death, his collected plays were published as *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories & Tragedies* (now known as the First Folio).

### **Shakespeare’s language**

Commenting on Shakespeare’s language, McMahon (2001) says that, “Readers encountering Shakespeare for the first time usually find Early Modern English difficult to understand,” but this should not be the barrier to appreciating the richness of this language and forming one’s appreciation of the Bard.

Concerning Shakespeare’s language, McMahon adds that one of the peculiar things that modern readers will notice is with regard to the use of pronouns. Similar to The King James Version of the Bible, Shakespeare’s pronouns are slightly different from the modern English which can cause confusion to the modern readers for example words like “thou” (you), “thee” and “ye” (objective cases of ‘you’), and “thy” and “thine” (your/ yours) which appear throughout Shakespeare’s plays (and poems). Besides that, Shakespeare wrote most of his plays in poetry, specifically blank verse (consists of lines in unrhymed iambic pentameter).

Also, an important point to note is with regard to Shakespeare’s words and sentences. One may occasionally find unfamiliar words in Shakespeare’s works and the reason for this unfamiliarity is simply because these words are obsolete today, for example words like ‘aroint thee’ (begone), ‘coign’ (corner), ‘anon’ (immediately), ‘alarum’ (a call to arm), sewer (butler), and ‘hautboy’ (a very loud wind instrument designed for outdoor ceremonials, the forerunner of the orchestral oboe). There are also words which meaning have changed over the centuries like the words ‘composition’ (meaning: terms of peace), ‘present’ (meaning: immediate), ‘choppy’ (nowadays ‘chapped’ or ‘wrinkled’), ‘addition’ (nowadays ‘title’), and ‘receipt’ (meaning: container). When it comes to the sentence structure, Shakespeare frequently shifts his sentences away from “normal” English arrangement, for example Shakespeare often rearranges subjects and verbs (e.g. “Goes he” instead of “He goes” and an example from *Macbeth*’s opening scene when Ross says, “As thick as tale/ came post with post,” instead of “Post with post came as thick as tale”). Also, we find that Shakespeare often uses a kind of

sentence structure that depends on the separation of words that would normally go together, for example (also from Macbeth) when Malcom says, “This is the sergeant/ Who, like a good and hardy soldier, fought/ ‘Gainst my captivity’ (here we can see that the subject ‘who’ and the verb ‘fought’ are separated). In addition, occasionally, Shakespeare holds the basic sentence elements back i.e. delaying them until much subordinate material has already been given, and as an example (again from Macbeth) when Lady Macbeth uses an inverted structure that provides this kind of delay when she says “For those of old/ And the late dignities heaped up to them/ We rest your hermits” (where in a “normal” English sentence it would have begun with the “We rest your hermits”). Last, but not least, Shakespeare’s sentences are sometimes complicated not because of unusual structures, interruptions or delays, but because he omits words and parts of words that English sentences normally require, for instance (again another example from Macbeth) Angus says to Macbeth, “We are sent/ To give thee from our royal master thanks/ [We are sent] Only to herald thee into his sight/ Not [to] pay thee” where here we see omissions, and the omitted words are furnished in brackets to add clarity but they also slow the speech (Mowat & Werstine, 2013).

Finally, another important feature of Shakespeare’s language is wordplay. There are many kinds of wordplay found especially in Shakespeare’s plays. One of them is puns, or double meanings, where a word can mean one thing in a given context. Shakespeare often uses puns in order to show the distance between the surface meaning (or apparent meaning) and what meanings lie underneath. An example of pun can be found in the play Macbeth when Lady Macbeth says, “If he do bleed/ I’ll glad of the grooms withal/ For it must seem their guilt”. Here Lady Macbeth seems to be playing with the double meaning of ‘guilt/ gilt’. Another kind of wordplay that is often employed by Shakespeare is metaphor. “A metaphor is a play on words in which one object or idea is expressed as if it were something else, something with which it is said to share common features. To illustrate this, again an example from Macbeth used. This is when Macbeth expresses his own lack of motivation before the murder through a complex metaphor in which he compares his “intent” to a horse and his “ambition” the knight preparing to ride the horse. Macbeth says, “I have no spur/ To prick the sides of my intent, but only/ Vaulting ambition which o’erleaps itself...” (McMahon, 2001, Mowat & Werstine, 2013).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This section discusses the methodology used, respondents and sample size, research instrument, data collection and data analysis procedures.

### **Research Methodology**

The researchers utilize quantitative methodology in order to get the type of primary data needed i.e. quantitative data. Only simple statistics are required in the forms of frequencies and percentages.

### **Respondents and Sample Size**

The respondents of this research are tertiary level students who major in English language studies (ELS). Purposive sampling is used in order to select the samples. The sample size is 30 (n=30) and it is made up of ELS students at an institute of higher learning in Malaysia.

### **Research Instrument**

In order to collect the data, a questionnaire is developed and it consists of 2 sections. The first section requires the respondents to provide demographic information while the second section focuses on getting information concerning the respondents’ familiarity with Shakespeare’s life and works as well as the respondents’ sentiments on Shakespeare’s works.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The questionnaire is prepared in Google Form format. When the questionnaire is ready, the Google Form link is sent to the identified respondents via WhatsApp application. The completed questionnaire (Google Form) is then submitted to the researcher. In total, 30 questionnaire forms have been completed and submitted to the researcher.

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

The responses for the questionnaire are compiled, arranged and tabulated automatically in the Google Form application. The tabulated data are the analyzed in order to look for the patterns in the responses.

## **EMPIRICAL RESULTS**

To discuss the results of the research, the data are arranged and presented in three sections so that logical conclusions can be drawn effectively and the research questions can be addressed effectively.

### **Respondents' Familiarity with Shakespeare's Works**

Table 1 elicits information from the respondents in order to find out how familiar they are with Shakespeare's works. A strong majority of the respondents say that they are a little bit familiar with Shakespeare's works (68.8%), while 28.1% of the respondents say they are quite familiar with Shakespeare's works, but none of the respondents (0%) say that they are Shakespeare enthusiast. Only 3.1% of the respondents say they are not familiar with Shakespeare's works at all.

Table 1. Respondents' Familiarity with Shakespeare's Works (n=30)

<b>Response</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
I know a little bit about Shakespeare and his works	68.8
I'm quite familiar with Shakespeare and his works	28.1
I'm not familiar at all	3.1
I'm a Shakespeare enthusiast	0

Meanwhile Table 2 identifies how knowledgeable the respondents are about Shakespeare's works. Based on the 3 questions asked about Shakespeare's works, the average score for correct answers is quite significant with 54.2%, while the wrong answers 21.9% and 23.9% of the respondents answer not sure/ no idea.

Table 2. Respondents' Knowledge about Shakespeare's Works (n=30)

<b>No</b>	<b>Questions</b>	<b>Answers</b>		
		<b>Correct (%)</b>	<b>Wrong (%)</b>	<b>Not Sure/ No Idea (%)</b>
2	What are Shakespeare's poems called? ( <b>Answer:</b> Sonnets)	62.5	21.9	15.6
3	Which play is NOT written/ produced by Shakespeare? ( <b>Answer:</b> Paradise Lost)	46.9	21.8	31.3
4	Complete the following verse from a Shakespeare's poem, "Shall I compare thee to a..." ( <b>Answer:</b> summer's day?)	53.1	21.9	25
	<b>Average Score:</b>	<b>54.2</b>	<b>21.9</b>	<b>23.9</b>

### Respondents' Familiarity with Shakespeare's Life

Table 3 shows whether or not the respondents know about the life of Shakespeare. Based on the 3 questions asked about the life of Shakespeare, the average score for corrects answers is 45.8%, wrong answers 37.5% and not sure/ no idea 16.7%.

Table 3. Respondents' Knowledge about Shakespeare's Life (n=30)

No	Questions	Answers		
		Correct (%)	Wrong (%)	Not Sure/ No Idea (%)
1	Why is Shakespeare called 'the Bard'? (Answer: He was a great poet)	53.1	28.1	18.8
2	Where was Shakespeare born? (Answer: Stratford-upon-Avon)	34.4	34.3	31.3
3	Shakespeare lived during which era? (Answer: Elizabethan)	50	50	-
<b>Average Score:</b>		<b>45.8</b>	<b>37.5</b>	<b>16.7</b>

### Respondents' Sentiments towards Shakespeare's Works

Table 4 shows respondents' opinions about Shakespeare's works. The answers given by the respondents indicate that the percentage of those who find it easy to understand Shakespeare's works and those who find it difficult to understand Shakespeare's works is equal with 37.5% each. Meanwhile, 25% of the respondents say that they have no idea.

Table 4. Respondents' Opinions Whether or Not Shakespeare's Works Easy or Difficult to Understand (n=30)

Item	Respondents' Answers (%)
Easy	37.5
Difficult	37.5
No Idea	25

While Table 5 indicates reasons why the respondents say they can appreciate Shakespeare's works. The two reasons with the highest percentages are because of language (65.5%) and the message/ moral values (65.5%). This is followed by aesthetic value (56.3%) and only 6.3% of the respondents say they have no idea.

Table 5. Reasons Why Respondents Say They Can appreciate Shakespeare's Works (n=30)

Item	Respondents' Answers (%)
Language	65.6
The Message/ Moral Values	62.5
Aesthetic Value	56.3
No Idea	6.3

Table 6 on the other hand indicates reasons why the respondents say they find it difficult to appreciate or understand Shakespeare's works. The two reasons with the highest percentage are because of the archaic language and poetic language with 46.9% each. This is followed by difficult to understand (31.3%), not relevant for present context (25%) while 15.6% of the respondents pick none of the reasons mentioned above.

Table 6. Reasons Why Respondents Find It Difficult to Appreciate or Understand Shakespeare's Works (n=30)

<b>Item</b>	<b>Respondents' Answers (%)</b>
Archaic Language	46.9
Poetic Language	46.9
Difficult to Understand	31.3
Not Relevant for Present Context	25
None of the Above	15.6

Table 7 indicates whether or not the respondents would read or continue reading Shakespeare in the future. 50% of the respondents say they are not sure, 46.9% of the respondents say yes while only 3.1% of the respondents say no.

Table 7. Respondents' Answers Whether or Not They Would Read or Continue Reading Shakespeare's works in the Future (n=30)

<b>Item</b>	<b>Respondents' Answers (%)</b>
Not Sure	50
Yes	46.9
No	3.1

Finally Table 8 indicates whether or not the respondents would suggest to other people to read Shakespeare's works. 59.4% of the respondents say yes while 40.6% of the respondents say no.

Table 8. Respondents' Answers Whether or Not They Would Suggest to Other People to Read Shakespeare's Works (n=30)

<b>Item</b>	<b>Respondents' Answers (%)</b>
Yes	59.4
No	40.6

## **CONCLUSION**

From the findings we can conclude that:

1. Majority of the respondents are familiar with Shakespeare's works although the number is not that significant.
2. Meanwhile, majority of the students (although the number too is not that significant) are not familiar with the life of Shakespeare.
3. Although the respondents can appreciate Shakespeare's works due to factors such as language, message and aesthetic value, they find understanding the works difficult due to the archaic and poetic language that is difficult to comprehend, besides not being relevant to the present time.
4. Majority of the respondents also lack the interest to read Shakespeare's works though they do not mind suggesting to others to read the works of Shakespeare.

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