

## TEACHING SHAKESPEARE AT TERTIARY LEVEL: PRIMARY AND SECONDARY BENEFITS

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**Abstract.** Teaching Shakespeare at all levels of education (primary, secondary and tertiary) has a long history not only in English but in non-English speaking countries as well. The inclusion of mandatory courses on Shakespeare in the curriculum of university studies of English as a second/foreign language has proven to be particularly beneficial and worthwhile, although some concerns are voiced about the outdatedness of Shakespeare's works. What we propose in this paper is that Shakespeare should be preserved in the curriculum of English majors, especially in the curriculum of English majors of EFL as the benefits for the students are, in fact, multifarious. In fact, on the basis of careful class observation, introspection and self- evaluation, as well as students' feedback, what we suggest here is that there are two types of benefits of teaching Shakespeare at university level – primary and secondary benefits. The former affect students' knowledge of the English language, i.e. improve the development of students' language skills (writing, reading, speaking and listening). The latter are more general and influence the development of students' personality by improving their thinking processes, emotional intelligence and cultural awareness. All of these, we believe, are pivotal in generating well-rounded future English professionals who at the same time will be well-balanced individuals capable of handling all sorts of life challenges.

**Keywords:** *Shakespeare, tertiary level, EFL, benefits.*

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### 1. Introduction

William Shakespeare, the Renaissance Bard of Avon, has won the title of the most acknowledged writer in the Western literary canon and miraculously holds it to this day – some four centuries after his death. In fact, “of all the world's writers, none has received more attention than Shakespeare” and “only the Bible is available in more languages” (Solomone & Davis, 1997). Shakespeare's plays and sonnets are still studied at schools; the plays are still staged in different countries across the globe; new filmed versions of the plays are constantly released; numerous works of art inspired by Shakespeare's works spring to life in all corners of the world to date.

Many researchers have tried to explain what keeps Shakespeare entrenched in this position of global prominence, despite his long-term physical absence. In that respect, Gibson (1998) proposes that the evergreen nature of Shakespeare's characters, stories and themes lies “in the virtually endless opportunities they

offer for reinterpretation and local application of familiar human relationships and passions”. Brumfit (2001) argues that Shakespeare's works “chime just as well with our modern age due to the ambiguity of his philosophy, his knowledge of the human heart, his deep sensitivity for what it is to be human”.

Whichever of these reasons one decides to treat as the most viable one, the fact remains that the long line of Shakespeare's followers who are committed to keeping him 'alive' in their own artistic ways constantly renews itself. What all these devotees have in common is the strong likelihood that their first encounter with the Bard has happened at some point of their education – primary, secondary or tertiary, and that a particular teacher has probably been the main 'culprit' for instilling in them such deep appreciation for the Bard. Although Shakespeare's presence can be detected at all levels of education, still, here we focus on teaching Shakespeare at tertiary level. More precisely, the aim of this study is to look at the role of the Shakespeare courses in the context of studying English language and literature, especially, in the case of studying English as a foreign language (EFL).

A quick glance at some higher education institutions which offer English language and literature study programs, in fact, can unveil the treatment that the Shakespeare courses normally get at tertiary level. Thus, in the Republic of Macedonia, not only are the courses on Shakespeare an integral part of the curricula

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of EFL majors at most of the higher education institutions (e.g. “Ss. Cyril and Methodius” University in Skopje; “St. Kliment Ohridski” University in Bitola; “Goce Delchev” University in Shtip, and The American College in Skopje), but also it seems that they normally have a status of compulsory courses. This indicates that Macedonian higher education normally attaches great significance to Shakespeare in the context of studying English. By analogy, one might assume that this is a global trend. However, a new report about the United States – where, of course, most of the English majors are at the same time English native speakers, uncovers that English majors at the vast majority of the most prestigious colleges and universities are no longer required to take a course focused in depth on Shakespeare (Anderson, 2015). To investigate this matter further would go well beyond the scope of this study, but what happens in the States is quite indicative of what might happen, in the near future, with the Shakespeare’s share of the educational cake at tertiary level for both English majors and EFL majors. One might only presuppose that the cries of those who doubt the relevance of Shakespeare’s works in the modern educational context of the 21st century, and who believe that Shakespeare should finally be ‘let to rest in peace’ will decidedly intensify and gain momentum. Hence, the question that we seek to address in this study is: “Should courses on Shakespeare be reduced, excluded or preserved in the curriculum of English/EFL majors?”

## 2. Research aim and methodology

The aim of this study is to establish argumentation in favor of the premise that Shakespeare’s exquisite pieces of literature should be preserved in the curriculum of English/EFL majors. In fact, what this study proposes is that courses on Shakespeare at tertiary level still have impressive contemporary educational relevance, as they enable students to successfully ‘reap’ manifold benefits which, in turn, round off both their professional profile and personality as well. The attempt to verify the above-stated premise rests on a case study conducted at “St. Kliment Ohridski” University, more precisely at the English Department of the Faculty of Education – Bitola. Namely, the research method applied here is based on teacher’s observation, reflection, and regular note-keeping practice of the various teaching activities and strategies utilized in teaching

Shakespeare, and, more importantly, of the students’ responses and reactions to them, for a period of two academic years. Needless to say, the role of the teacher in this case study and the role of the author of this paper, overlap. In order to raise the level of objectivity of the study, and to include the students’ perspective on the issue at hand, at the end of the two-year period, we carried out a structured interview with the final beneficiaries of the course, i.e. the students themselves (the last two generations which had already completed the Shakespeare course in the academic years: 2015/2016 and 2016/2017), and as a result we compiled a corpus of students’ feedback too. Once the corpus of relevant data (teacher’s observations, findings, insights and students’ feedback) was compiled, the next stage of the analysis was to sort the data; to compare and contrast the teachers’ observations with the students’ feedback; and finally, to extract the commonalities that emerge regarding the benefits, for which both parties involved in the case study were in agreement.

## 3. Theoretical background

Prior to presenting the benefits of teaching Shakespeare at tertiary level that were identified within this research, let us consider two important factors that greatly outlined the course of the current study – the structure of the course itself as it is realized at the Faculty of Education – Bitola, and Khatib et al.’s (2011) classification of benefits stemming from teaching literature in the context of foreign language teaching. According to the current accredited study program in English language and literature at the Faculty of Education - Bitola, the course on Shakespeare is a mandatory, one-semester course, realized in Year III, throughout a fifteen-week semester with 5 instruction hours (of 45 minutes each) per week. In terms of its contents, the course was divided into two major segments. The first segment was introductory in its nature and it subsumed about one third of the entire course. Its aim was to familiarize the students with salient information about Shakespeare’s life and career as well as the social, political and cultural aspects of Shakespeare’s time. The second segment of the course, on the other hand, offered a close inspection of a selection of 6 to 7 of Shakespeare’s most acclaimed plays (e.g. *The Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*,

etc.). As to the ways in which the teaching process was actually realized, the weekly lectures were commonly based on a wide variety of teaching activities ranging from traditional teacher-centered lectures to more interactive student-centered lectures during which students took much more active part by participating in various class discussions, debates, role-plays and quizzes. They were also expected to deliver power point presentations on previously assigned topics related to Shakespeare's plays; to read and thoroughly analyze excerpts from the plays; to watch and discuss segments of filmed versions of the plays, etc. The versatility of the teaching activities was intended to cater not only for the various students' learning styles but also to assist students in acquiring the competences stipulated in the study program.

The other factor that we needed to take into account in the process of analyzing our data was the insights provided by other researchers regarding the benefits that literature yields in the context of language learning. In that respect, Khatib et al.'s (2011) recent study proved to be extremely helpful as it provided us with a rather comprehensive list of benefits which served as a solid ground for identifying and classifying the benefits in our case study. Thus, Khatib et al. (2011) propose the following benefits language learners gain from literature: authenticity of literary works; high level of motivation; cultural/intercultural awareness; sociolinguistic/pragmatic knowledge; increased grammar and vocabulary knowledge; improved language skills (writing, speaking, listening and reading), enhanced emotional intelligence (EQ) and critical thinking. In the following sections we will discuss the benefits we have identified in the context of teaching Shakespeare at the Faculty of Education – Bitola, which we believe solidify Shakespeare's position in the curriculum of English/EFL majors.

#### **4. The results of the study case**

The analysis of the data gathered via class observation and structured interviews showed that both the teacher and students agreed on a number of various benefits, of which, on the basis of the incidence with which they recurred both in teachers' notes and in students' feedback, some were obviously more frequently mentioned than the others. To avoid diluting the study, and for the sake of precision and clarity, we decided to deal

solely with the most frequently mentioned, and consequently, the most noteworthy benefits. In addition, the analysis of the most frequently recurring benefits led us to conclude that, on the basis of some common features, they can actually be grouped into two separate, but still mutually closely related, sets of benefits, which henceforward will be referred to as primary and secondary benefits of teaching Shakespeare, respectively.

##### **A) Primary benefits of teaching Shakespeare at tertiary level**

The common feature of the primary benefits is that they instigate the improvement of English/EFL majors' knowledge of English, which is of paramount importance for them as future language professionals. Our class observations from the perspective of a teacher, unequivocally, pointed to the fact that the Shakespeare course significantly boosts the development of students' four basic language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. How was that achieved, is discussed in some detail in the following sections.

##### **1. Enhancing English/EFL majors' reading skills**

The principal instrument used for enhancing English/EFL majors' reading skills, understandably, entails assigning regular reading tasks. Therefore, the two generations of EFL majors at the Faculty of Education – Bitola which undertook the Shakespeare course in the academic years 2015/2016 and 2016/2017, were assigned to read one play per week from the list of plays that had been shortlisted for that particular semester. It is fair to admit that the reading of the assigned plays was not intended solely to foster students' reading skills; it prepared them to take active participation in the ensuing class activities (e.g. discussions, debates, quizzes, etc.). In other words, the weekly reading assignments, as shown in the following sections, were practically inseparable from some of the other activities which were directed at improving EFL majors' other language skills. Furthermore, the requirement to read the entire texts of the plays evidently served the purpose of consolidating students' extensive reading skills, in which case the focus was on understanding the plot in general, and on familiarizing students with the characters depicted in the plays. However, the students also had a chance to reinforce their intensive reading skills by means of the detailed



reading and profound analysis of a selection of specific excerpts from the plays they had been instructed and expected to undertake. In order to alleviate the task of reading the plays, the students were instructed to read them in Modern English, not in Early Modern English – the language in which Shakespeare wrote the plays. Still, the majority of the interviewed students reported back that their first encounters with the plays were a true ‘ordeal’, i.e. they found the reading painstakingly slow, principally due to the fact that they needed time to cope with the abundance of figures of speech and idiomatic expressions they had never come across before. However, more importantly, the students also confirmed that, over time, and with persistence, their reading skills had gradually improved. Namely, during the structured interview, many of the interviewed students stated that they were able to carry out each subsequent reading assignment at a much faster pace, and, with more confidence and enjoyment.

## 2. Enriching students’ speaking skills

Our experience with teaching the course on Shakespeare shows that this course can be utilized to improve English/EFL majors’ speaking skills considerably. In our case this was achieved, principally in two ways – firstly, by significantly extending students’ vocabulary; and, secondly, by exposing students to and ‘dragging them into’ plenty of thought-provoking and engaging verbal interactions with their fellow students in which they were encouraged to freely voice their opinion and defend their stance. As it rightfully might be assumed, both these endeavors (the extending of the vocabulary and the frequent verbal interactions), to a great extent, relied on the weekly reading assignments of the assigned plays. There is no doubt that reading the plays brought students closer to Shakespeare’s impressive vocabulary. To make the most efficient use of this contact the students were instructed, while reading the plays, to keep a watchful eye on new words, phrases, idiomatic expressions, and to record them in their own personal glossary. The ultimate goal of compiling a glossary, of course, was to help them learn and memorize as many new words and expressions as possible, which, in turn, they were told, they should use during class activities and examinations in particular. Feedback from students reveals that this task, at times, was experienced as a real ‘drag’, especially when the plot got extremely exciting since re-

cording a new word in the glossary postponed slightly the unveiling of what happened next in the play. On the positive side, the interviewed students’ further suggested that they learned to appreciate this assignment, as they became more aware of the necessity to approach Shakespeare’s extraordinary linguistic pool with special care, not only because it helped them grasp the plot more fully, but also because it was such a good platform for internalizing a true linguistic treasure. Reading the plays, or rather, having read a play previously, was also instrumental for taking active participation in class activities (e.g. discussions, debates, quizzes, games, etc.), whose aim, apart from increasing students’ content knowledge related to the course, was also to develop EFL students’ speaking skills, i.e. their fluency.

Class observation showed that, of all these activities, class discussions were particularly favored among the students. Normally, the discussions arose very spontaneously, especially during the analysis of the selected excerpts, which commonly allow for more than one possible interpretation, which, in turn, meant that they easily sparked juxtaposed positions and opinions on the part of the students. Examples of such excerpts are Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” speech; Shylock’s impressionable soliloquy: “Hath not a Jew eyes...”, etc.

## 3. Enhancing EFL majors’ writing skills

Another benefit which constantly recurred not only in the teacher’s notes but also in the students’ responses during the structured interview was the marked progress in our students’ writing skills. Namely, every Shakespearean play offers rich material for various writing tasks based on character studies, critical analyses of scenes and speeches, paraphrases and interpretations, etc. Nevertheless, with our students, we focused on developing their argumentative essays writing competences. Considering the fact that our students were not sufficiently exposed to this specific writing task previously, class observation showed that, generally speaking, regular and persistent practice was needed for the students to start observing all the established rules for successful argumentative essay writing (e.g. essay structure – introduction, body and conclusion; formulation of thesis; selection of topic sentences for body paragraphs; selection of main and supporting arguments; provision of smooth transitions between paragraphs, etc.) Understandably, argumentative essay writing assignments revolved chiefly

around the characters themes, motifs and symbols which were depicted in the plays, and profusely discussed in class. Thus, for instance, in one of the essays, the students were required to compare and contrast various villains from different plays (e.g. Iago in "Othello", Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in "Macbeth", etc.); then, in another essay, they had to deal with the female characters and the theme of love in the plays (e.g. Juliet in "Romeo and Juliet", Desdemona in "Othello", Ophelia in "Hamlet", etc.), etc. The writing of the essays was realized as a homework assignment and each student was required to submit 4 argumentative essays (of 500 words each) by the end of the semester – 2 essays prior the 1st mid-term exam and 2 more prior the 2nd mid-term exam. The argumentative essay writing assignment was obviously one of the assignments that was heavily relied on the reading assignments. To put it differently, only those students who had completed the reading of a given play, were actually in a position to write a solid argumentative essay, based on analyzing and paraphrasing segments of the plays; drawing parallels, inferring logical conclusions, etc. The interviewed students also unanimously agreed that the persistent and focused argumentative essay writing practice was a truly eye-opening experience for them as they have learned some extremely useful writing tips that they could easily apply elsewhere too.

#### 4. Enhancing EFL majors' listening skill

The activity from which the development of students' listening skills benefited most was primarily watching segments of filmed versions of the plays, in class. This was normally followed by discussions or other types of activities such as short quizzes, listening comprehension tasks, writing short summaries, etc. Due to the time constraints, unfortunately, this was not done on a regular basis, but rather occasionally, the idea being to introduce freshness and variety to the class activities. Also, as it was impossible to watch the entire filmed versions in class, the students were always encouraged to do that at home at their own pace. Fortunately, given the advanced technological prospects (the internet, YouTube, etc.) nowadays this assignment proved to be very easily feasible, and, in fact, quite enjoyable for all the students. On the whole, students in their oral feedback were positive about this activity, claiming that they found it very helpful primarily in, as they put it, completing the mental image they have created of the characters and

the events while reading the plays. They also admitted to having troubles occasionally with catching up with some of the actors' rather fast and almost incomprehensible speech, but, by and large, they all agreed that this activity was a great exercise, not only for getting accustomed to listening to and comprehending a wide variety of native speakers, but also for improving their own pronunciation in English.

#### B) Secondary benefits of teaching Shakespeare at tertiary level

The second set of benefits, referred here as the secondary benefits, are more general in nature and affect predominantly students' demeanor and personality as they bolster their critical thinking, emotional intelligence, as well as their understanding of the target culture which is crucial for any future linguist. This is completely in line with Flachmann's (1993) claim that "teaching Shakespeare in the English classroom gives teachers hope that their students will discover in the plays - not only about literature and theater, but also about themselves and their place in the universe around them" (in Madsen, 2001).

##### 1. Boosting English/EFL majors' critical thinking and emotional intelligence

The careful class observation led us to conclude that some of the activities utilized in teaching Shakespeare can be extremely beneficial in bolstering students' ability for critical and logical thinking as well as for enhancing their emotional intelligence. These two benefits, alongside with the benefits we dubbed primary in our research, were also identified by Khatib et al. (2011) as well. Teacher's observation and note-taking practice showed that in-class discussions and argumentative essay writing practice, in particular, served as perfect platforms for improving students' thinking abilities and emotional intelligence. Thus, during the discussions all students were challenged to think in a logical and reasoned way in their search for plausible answers to various controversial issues and dilemmas arising from the demeanor of the characters in the plays. More specifically, they were asked to come up with adequate arguments, and, subsequently, with suitable pieces of evidence from the plays to support their arguments. The argumentative essay writing practice also relied, more or less, on the same mental endeavors, which means that it provided the students with an additional opportunity to practice and per-

fect this skill of creative and critical thinking. Bearing witness of the true whirlpool of characters presented in Shakespeare's plays, some of whom are blatantly dragged to the very bottom of life, while some are luckily thrust to the top, our students, undoubtedly, familiarized themselves with a multitude of possible life situations and challenges, and last but not least, with potential ways of handling them. Thus, for instance, the students were led to observe closely characters who were desperately fighting for love (e.g. the two 'star-crossed' lovers in "Romeo and Juliet"); or characters who were completely consumed by jealousy (e.g. the Moor in "Othello"), or overpowered by an unquenchable thirst for revenge (e.g. Hamlet in "Hamlet"), etc. The up-close inspection of their reactions and behavior constituted a solid ground for coming to really meaningful realizations, reaching truly important and even life-changing conclusions, and learning valuable life lessons which students can apply later on in their own life experiences. Thus, in fact, they worked on boosting their own emotional intelligence. Namely, in their statements during the class activities and the structured interview, it was noticeable that they were provoked to try to better understand their own feelings, and to be more empathetic towards other people. Even more importantly, in the discussions and in their essays they gave clear signs that they have become more aware of the importance of establishing firm self-control and self-motivation. On the whole, all these insights led us to conclude that our EFL majors' social skills improved considerably due to their contact with the Shakespearean drama.

## 2. Raising students' awareness of British history and culture

Mastering a foreign language fully without having a proper grasp of the social, political, cultural aspects of the society in which that language is used as a means of communication is virtually impossible. In that respect, we believe that the Shakespeare course at the Faculty of Education - Bitola, provided our EFL majors with invaluable insights into many different aspects of British history and culture. Thus, the introductory lectures, for instance, were completely dedicated to depicting the exact historical and cultural conditions in which Shakespeare worked and produced his impressive masterpieces. Students had a glimpse at the Elizabethan times; the Elizabethan theatre as the primary source of entertainment for

people of all walks of life; its conventions and organization; William Shakespeare's life and career; his acting troop and their working principles, etc. All of these data were vital later on for understanding the plays properly. Moreover, the analysis of each of the short-listed plays normally began with an informative layout of the social conditions, events and circumstances that, in all likelihood, galvanized Shakespeare to tackle a particular topic. Thus, for instance, students were informed that the composition of King Lear was probably instigated by a controversial court cases in London in Shakespeare's time in which disloyal and ungrateful children of wealthy families were suing their elderly, infirm fathers in an attempt to prove their alleged insanity, and to lay their hands on their father's fortunes. Or in the case of the Merchant of Venice, they found out that the controversial character of the Jewish usurer – Shylock, was probably inspired by the Jewish doctor who was tried and executed for attempting to poison Queen Elizabeth I in Shakespeare's time. Shakespeare's history plays (e.g. "Richard III", "Henry VIII", "Henry V", "Julius Caesar", etc.) as well, despite their lack of historical exactness, presented students with significant pieces of evidence regarding Britain's heroic past and monarchs. Even the ones that are based on Roman history (e.g. "Julius Caesar") are deemed to bear clear references to events related to British history. In "Julius Caesar", for instance, historians and literary critics propose that Shakespeare voices rather openly his deep concern over their aging monarch, Queen Elizabeth I, and warned against the possible anarchy which might ensue if the delicate question of the succession was not handled properly and in due time. The interviews with English majors, regarding this issue as well, confirmed that the course on Shakespeare has definitely made them feel much more confident in understanding British culture and history. Even more importantly, as some of them further stated, this course provided them with a much better understanding as to why the world functions the way it does, especially, with regards to politics and the centers of power.

## Conclusion

The purpose of the paper was to defend the premise that teaching Shakespeare at tertiary level is worth preserving in the curriculum of English/EFL majors. In fact, relying on a case study carried out at the Faculty of

Education – Bitola, we tried to outline some of the most important benefits EFL majors gain from this course in particular. The case study encompassed both the teacher and students' perspective. For convenience, we dealt with the most prominent ones and grouped them into two groups – primary and secondary benefits. The former boost students' four language skills; whereas, the latter affect the development of students' personality. Understandably, all these benefits are vital in generating both knowledgeable, well-rounded future English linguists, as well as tolerant global citizens of the world who are prepared to embrace differences and appreciate 'the otherness' on all possible grounds (race, religion, nationality, etc.).

### **Conflict of interests**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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