



'A language that I understand not'

What do students find difficult when they read Shakespeare?

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@ShakespeareLang



Arts & Humanities
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2015



What do you think of Shakespeare's language?

complicated

confusing

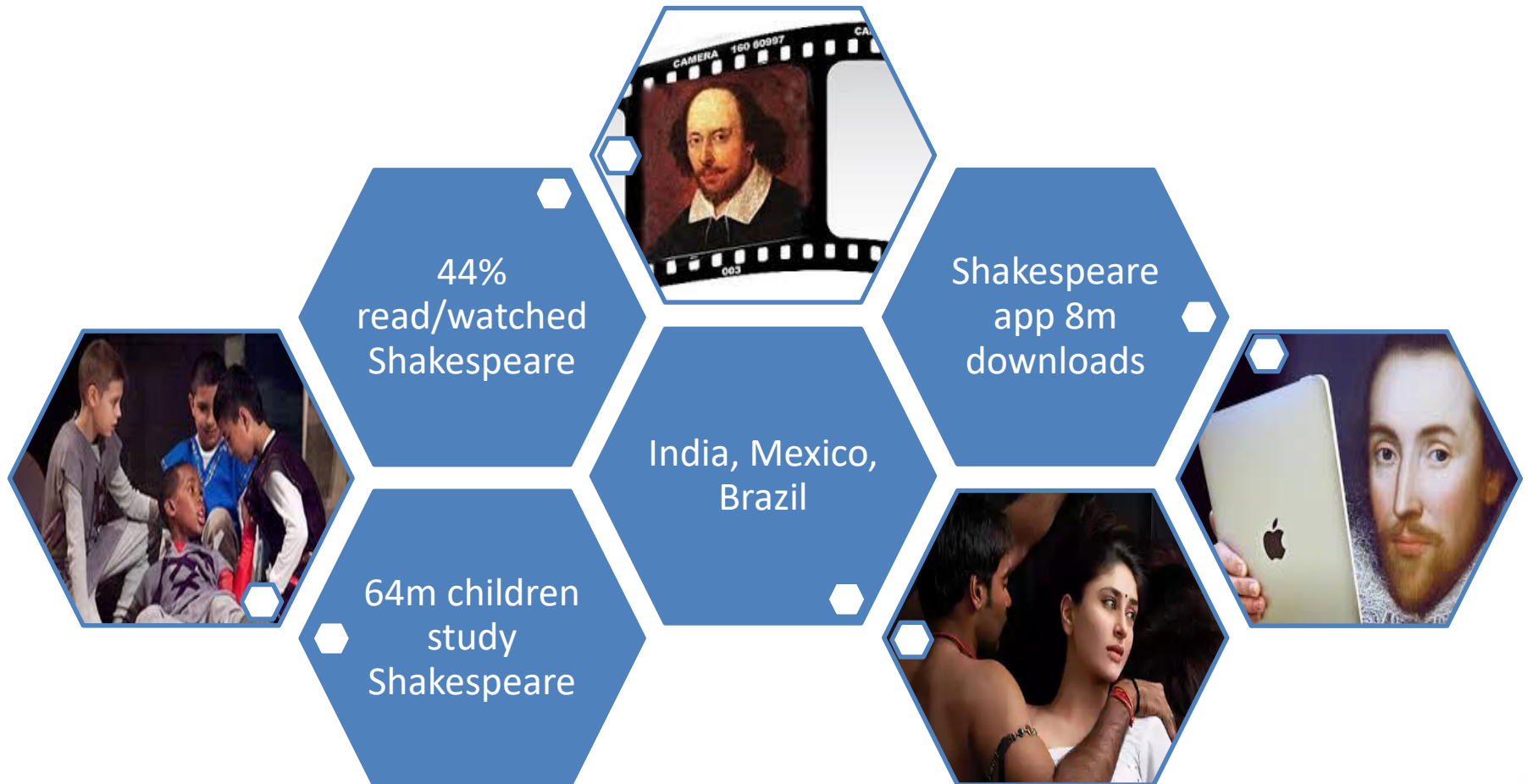
symbolic

intricate

beautiful



Why are we doing this?



What do students find difficult about Shakespeare's language?

1. Given Shakespeare texts, what do students identify as difficult and how do they interpret difficulties?
2. How well do students understand specific linguistic forms found in Shakespeare?
3. In conversation with other students, what do they think of Shakespeare's language?

How did we design the study?

Task 1: Underline anything difficult to understand in 6 extracts of about 80 words each (various plays).

Task 2: Rate difficulty of 20 sentences from various plays and state briefly what they mean (sentences capture variety of possible difficulties).

Task 3: In focus groups, address questions regarding what they think is difficult to read in Shakespeare.

Task 1: Extracts (see handout)

Example

Who would fardels bear, *something heavy?*
To grunt and sweat under a weary life

Play	Character	Beginning
R3	Richard	Was ever woman in this humour wooed?
TS	Petruchio	Thus have I politicly begun my reign...
H5	Mountjoy	Thus says my king: Say thou to Harry of England...
Ham	First Clown	Give me leave. Here lies the water...
KL	Lear/Cordelia	How, how, Cordelia! Mend your speech a little...
MA	Dogberry	Well, for your favour, sir, why, give God thanks...

Task 2: Sentences

① I don't understand it at all ② I don't understand it very well ③ I'm not sure if I understand it ④ I understand it quite well ⑤ I understand it very well

Play	Item	Aspect of language
H5	The vasty fields of France	metrical convenience
Ham	Woo't weep? Woo't fight? Woo't fast?	archaic vb. + contraction
TN	no woman has, nor never none	multiple negation
LLL	Judas I am, yclept Maccabaeus.	archaic verb
TNK	You must e'en take it patiently.	contraction
MV	Let his deservings, and my love withal	archaic adv./prep.
Cym	I have assailed her with musics	plural (now sing.)
1H4	I tell these news to thee?	concord
KL	a better where to find	functional shift
1H6	'Twas time, I trow , to wake	archaic verb

Task 2: Sentences (cont.)

① I don't understand it at all ② I don't understand it very well ③ I'm not sure if I understand it ④ I understand it quite well ⑤ I understand it very well

Play	Item	Aspect of language
Wiv	Bless thee, bully doctor!	false friend
TA	Gramercy , lovely Lucius	borrowing from French
2H4	whose chin is not yet fledged	coinage
Cor	My words disbenched you not	affixation
AYL	I would fain see this meeting	archaic adverb
JC	the people fell a-shouting	a- as particle
Tem	Well demanded, wench	archaic noun
AYL	a properer man	comparative
Tem	The mistress which I serve	grammatical change
RJ	So early walking did I see your son	word order

Discussion on Padlet

Sean • 1m

Shakespeare discussion questions

University of Barcelona

Hello! Thank you for agreeing to take part in our discussion about reading Shakespeare's texts. Feel free to add your thoughts on each discussion point by commenting below each post. There are no right or wrong answers, and your answers are completely anonymous.

What do you like and dislike about Shakespeare?

What do you find tricky when you read Shakespeare?

All the extracts are difficult to understand, especially if you don't know the context. But did one stand out as the most difficult? Explain what made it difficult.

To access this padlet from your tablet or phone, scan this code from our mobile app.





Who participated?

Native English speakers

A-level students

Lancaster Girls' Grammar
School



Linguistics undergraduates
Lancaster University

Non-native English speakers

English Studies undergraduates

University of Barcelona

2 groups



Results

Native
speakers

Task 1: most difficult items

Girls' Grammar (6 sts)	Linguistics undergrads (10 sts)
TS full-gorged, haggard	TS full-gorged, haggard
KL mar, begot	R3 bleeding witness, humour
R3 dissembling, bleeding witness	MA vagrom, constable KL mar, begot, plight
H5 rebuked, full ripe	H5 full ripe, bruise an injury
MA vagrom, constable	Ham will he nill he, Argal
Ham nill, Argal	

Task 2: most difficult items

Girls' Grammar (6 sts)	Linguistics undergrads (9 sts)
yclept	yclept
e'en	e'en
bully	bully
fain	I trow
I trow	Gramercy
fledged	fain
Gramercy	a better where
a better where	fledged
mistress which	woo't
withal	withal

Task 3: discussion

Like	Dislike
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • innovative, creative • complex - makes you think • characters & plots • language - poetic, eloquent, natural, creative, prestigious 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • wordy, lengthy, convoluted • outdated language/jokes • context-dependent • miss out on humour • hard work

Task 3: discussion

What's tricky in general?	Most difficult extract and why?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • apostrophes used for elision, punctuation • metaphor • meanings same as PDE? • word order • grammar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TS, R3, H5, Ham, MA • metaphors • lack of context

Results

Non-native speakers

Task 1: most difficult items

BCN undergrads 1 (14 sts)		BCN undergrads 2 (14 sts)	
TS	full-gorged, haggard	TS	full-gorged, haggard
KL	mar, begot	KL	mar, begot
H5	rebuked, ripe	H5	rebuked, ripe
R3	wooded, dissembling	Ham	nill, Argal
MA	vagrom, bid	R3	wooded, dissembling
Ham	nill, Argal	MA	vagrom, bid

Task 2: most difficult items

BCN undergrads 1 (14 sts)	BCN undergrads 2 (14 sts)
yclept	yclept
Gramercy	fledged
trow	bully
fain	wench
a-shouting	trow
wench	Gramercy
fledged	fain
e'en	woo't
bully	a-shouting
withal	withal

Task 3: discussion

Like	Dislike
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • plots and character construction • locations • identification with issues and characters • universality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • overcomplicated, pretentious, pedantic • overexposed, overrated • complex/archaic language • difficulty

Task 3: discussion

What's tricky in general?	Most difficult extract and why?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• (archaic) vocabulary• historical and classical references• (long) sentence structure• metaphors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• R3, TS, MA• figurative language• lack of context• difficulty of vocabulary

Conclusions

- Similarity of results for NS & NNS
- Words trump unusual constructions (whether word or grammar), ambiguities, metaphors, etc.
- Most cases, completely unknown. Top examples :
yclept, Gramercy, trow, fain, woo't, mar, haggard
- Occasionally, because known sense does not seem to fit context (e.g. *ripe, rebuked, bully, wench*).

Looking ahead going global

Our goals:

- (1) Find out more about what students of differing languages and cultures find difficult when they read Shakespeare, and adapt our resources accordingly.
- (2) Create an app for students and enthusiasts to learn about Shakespeare's language through a variety of activities.

What we need is:

Time, money and collaborators.

And looking even further ahead:

We would like to assess the quality of and improve translations of Shakespeare's texts.

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