# Using Macbeth to Stimulate Artistic Vision in ESL Students

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## INTRODUCTION

I've never been a big fan of Shakespeare. When my mother announced to my younger brothers and me that we were going to the Houston Shakespeare Festival, no amount of complaining would get me out of it. When she would wake us up at two in the morning to watch Zefferelli's production of *Romeo & Juliet* (because that's the only time a network would show it), I stayed up just for the novelty of being up late and getting to eat popcorn. In retrospect, I'm glad my mom took us kicking and screaming to see Shakespearean productions, because when I got into high school and college and really had to pay attention, at least I had a framework and some working knowledge that made it easier to suffer through.

I still found Shakespeare annoying. For starters, I don't care much for poetry. But I also never understood why four hundred years later, his work has such mass appeal among educators. I know English teachers have to teach it, and Theatre Arts teachers are obligated to present it to their students, but why is there such a premium put on one man who wrote only three dozen plays? Lope de Vega has approximately 600 attributed to him, yet his work fails to get mentioned outside of college theatre history courses.

It wasn't until I got into theatre in college that I realized that Shakespeare is meant to be performed. As a subject matter, students are right to abhor it. As a performance opportunity, however, they would be foolish to neglect it. My early detestation of Shakespeare as a subject makes me a good candidate to teach it. If I can find a way to make it interesting and engaging for me as a teacher, then chances are good I can make it engaging for students. Middle school students are a tough sell when it comes to Shakespeare, but I feel it's important to create a curriculum unit that will allow them positive exposure and creative ways to reflect on the themes. I feel the best way to do that is through offering students a chance to explore Shakespeare through various production activities. This will provide them with hands-on experiences in different aspects of theatre production, and will deepen their understanding of Shakespeare.

## UNIT BACKGROUND

When Shakespeare succeeds with younger students, it's because they have the prior knowledge that a western-civilization upbringing provides them with. More specifically, they along with their teachers share a common American culture. But what happens when the students are English Language Learners? Visual literacy (allowing students to comprehend with the help of visual media) is an indispensable instructional tool when approaching a difficult subject such as Shakespeare. Like most people, they attend to visual media more so than any other. If Shakespeare is going to be understood by anyone, it's going to rely on the building of mental images.

Consider how difficult it would be if someone were listening to a radio broadcast of a football game, and yet knew nothing about football. How easily would they be able to follow along and be able to picture what was happening? Someone who knows nothing about football might be able to get the gist of it because not every word the broadcaster says is a football term. They

create a new schema for football based on existing schema, and must produce their own mental images for what they're hearing.  Students struggle the same way when reading Shakespeare.  Not all the words are completely new to them; however, they are pulling from pre-existing schemas to create mental images for what they're reading and hearing.  This is why visual representations of Shakespeare such as films or paintings are important when teaching Shakespeare.

The culminating projects at the end of this unit are designed to give students the opportunity to create a visual representation of their ideas; to bring their artistic vision to life.  To have an artistic vision, students must learn to think like artists.  The creation of an artistic vision takes time for ideas to incubate.  There will be time devoted in this unit to what is known as "Deep Processing," which allows students to focus on the aesthetic aspect of literature.

> Deep processing helps students to experience poetry holistically through exercises that help develop their affective tendencies.  It stimulates creative thinking and helps students: (1) expand information; (2) focus on information which has just been presented; (3) thinking non-verbal terms; and (4) retrieve information. (Hepburn 2)

This method will play an important role in preparing students to create their artistic vision and consider the emotional response that their projects will embody, as well as solicit.

*Macbeth* is a good choice for several reasons.  First, the plot is easy to follow.  This isn't *Hamlet*, and it's very possible that they have encountered the story before, as many movies and television shows keep recycling Shakespeare's plots.  It may be a good idea for the instructor offer students a summary before they read so they get the basic story.

Secondly, the violence which is prevalent throughout the play will engage students.  If the students have any preconceived notions of Shakespeare, it's probably that it's boring and uneventful.  They will be interested to find out that this is one of several Shakespearean plays that do not shy away from violence.  If the instructor feels his/her class can handle it, they may even describe what is meant by phrases such as "unseam'd from the nave to the chops."

Lastly, Macbeth appeals to the senses in a way that not every Shakespeare play does.  There's lots to look at in the play, not the least of which is all the blood, but also the witches, the desolate landscape, and the ghosts.  There are also many sounds to hear as the wind rushes through the castle and the battles rage on the heaths.   There are also a host of sensations and feelings present in the play, from superstitious awe to eerie dread.

**OVERVIEW**

The focus of this curriculum unit is broad and has two intentions.  The first is to be flexible.  Most Fine Arts classes (particularly elementary and middle school) are dumping grounds for entire clusters of students.  This makes it difficult to focus on any one learning style.  Therefore, these activities are meant to offer the instructor (and students) a choice as to what is best for their class.  The second is that this is intended for English Language Learners.  The modifications a teacher would make for their ELL students would also be made by any teacher who was attempting to teach Shakespeare.  The use of visual aids, highlighted texts, and small-group instruction are recommended when teaching ELL students, but these same modifications are useful when introducing to Shakespeare to any student.

The success of this unit relies on the idea of holistic learning.  Not every student is going to catch on to what's happening in the plays at the same rate.  It's not paramount that your students fully understand the entire play before beginning their projects. The goal is that by the end of the project, they've deepened their understanding of *Macbeth*, its plot, characters, and themes.  The

instructor's job during the projects is to use small-group instruction time to review portions of the play, or further explain portions that the students are unclear on.

## MACBETH

By 8th grade, students have heard so much about taking responsibility for their actions, it has become an empty phrase. Once they read *Macbeth* and see what one man perceives his destiny to be and the path of dead bodies he leaves in his wake, they will hopefully understand the significance of personal responsibility for one's actions. The teacher may wish to discuss the culpability of Lady Macbeth. She kills no one, but she isn't innocent. By this age, students are aware that there is such a thing as instigating conflict, and that it can have the same consequences as actively participating in conflict. The lesson to be learned from *Macbeth* is that people are in control of their own destinies; that at the end of the day it's our choices, not prophecy, that make us or break us.

The concept of predestination should be explained and used in discussions. Questions about whether or not the future can truly be told and the idea of the self-fulfilling prophecy should be presented by pointing out examples from the play and then applying it to real life. This is also an appropriate way to introduce the topic of cultural superstitions. If a teacher is doing this with ELL students, he/she may ask about the superstitions of the various cultures present in the classroom.

The instructor should take time to focus on the mood and terrain of the play. This will be important later when students begin their projects. Attention should be drawn to the dreariness and desolation of the countryside and castles. The instructor should help students understand the presence of unnatural phenomenon, i.e. horses devouring each other, the contents of the witches' brew. To prepare students for creating their own artistic vision, the teacher may encourage discussion about alternate settings for *Macbeth*, asking students, "Where else could this work?"

Another aspect of Macbeth's destiny is his descent into the "dark-side." As Macbeth becomes further embroiled in his self-made mess, how does each decision affect his future decisions? Does the killing become easier to carry out and easier to justify? His journey is similar to that of another character from modern film, Anakin Skywalker, a.k.a. Darth Vader, from the *Star Wars* movies. The instructor may wish to draw parallels between these two characters to help his/her students understand this process of giving oneself over to violence. The third and sixth films in the *Star Wars* series will prove the most beneficial. *Revenge of the Sith* shows Anakin's transformation into Vader, and the end of *Return of the Jedi* reveals his humanity as he tries to redeem himself.

## TEXT

The text used comes from *Shakespeare in the Classroom*, by Dr. Albert Callum, Fearon Publishing. These cuttings are very bare. What remains intact is the basic story, spoken in paraphrased Shakespearean language. It would be wise for the teacher to familiarize (or re-familiarize) themselves with the original text so that you may add when students are confronted with gaps in the sub-plots or plot jumps. Some of the cuttings also omit characters.

However, the gaps in the text can be supplemented with videos or even the actual Shakespearean text. Students learn how to read Shakespeare the more they are exposed to it, so if they can make it through the edited version, there's a good chance they'll make it through a small portion of the actual play. The gaps in the cutting and subsequent presentation of what occurred in those gaps allows for discussions as to why that part was cut in the first place. Was it wise to cut that part? How is the story strengthened by having that part back in?

## IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

The implementation strategies are divided into two parts. The first are short activities meant to deepen the students' understanding of certain aspects of the play. The second set of strategies is the culminating projects. Here's a suggestion for how to structure the unit.

4 Hours – Preliminary activities
10 Hours – Culminating Projects

### Predestination

*But 'tis strange:*
*And oftentimes to win us to our harm*
*The instruments of darkness tell us truths;*
*Win us with honest trifles, to betray's*
*In deepest consequence. (Macbeth, I. iii)*

Begin by writing the word on the board and guiding the class through the definition. Present the following situations and ask students how they would react.

> *You meet a fortune-teller who tells you that you're going to win the lottery; be the next American Idol; release a top-selling album.*

> *You meet a fortune-teller who tells you that you're going to wind up on the street; spend time in jail; become disabled in a car accident.*

> *One of your teachers tells you that you will go to college, or that you will probably fail the class.*

Discuss the difference between hearing predictions from a fortune-teller and from a teacher. By the end of the discussion the students should arrive at the conclusion that people are in charge of their own destinies. As a final exercise, present this situation to the class:

> *You are the eighth-grade principal. Gary, a student, is sent to your office for fighting. When you ask him why he was fighting, he explains that he was fighting the boyfriend of a girl he likes and that he had a dream that he and the girl of his obsession would be together. How do you handle this? Explain your reasons.*

Have the class share their responses. Discuss with the class whether or not Macbeth realizes the error of his ways at the end of the play, and whether or not this realization redeems him to a certain extent.

### Mood

*The night has been unruly: where we lay,*
*Our chimneys were blown down: and, as they say,*
*Lamentings heard i' the air; strange screams of death (II. ii)*

The mood in a piece of literature is designed to illicit an emotional response. Review the following scenes of the play with the students, then ask them to close their eyes and listen as you read the paragraph. After reading, ask the students to volunteer how they felt. What should come out of this is that they have a better understanding of how the characters feel, which they can then use to help create the mood when they are assigned their projects.

### Scene 1: On the heath.

*Imagine that you are on a cold empty plain. There are no trees. No signs of life. The wind is chilling you to the bone. You have just come from a battle. Feel the ache of your muscles and how heavy your sword is. Feel the dried blood on your hands and face. How do you feel about*

*having just come from a battle where you sliced your enemy from his stomach up to his throat? You hear a strange voice in your ear and see the three witches. They're old and bony. They have beards. They tell you that you will be king.*

### Scene 3: In the castle

*Imagine that you are Macbeth. Everyone has gone to sleep and the only sounds are the wind. It's very cold. Strange things have been happening all night. You feel very nervous. Maybe even sick. Could the witches be right? Lady Macbeth's plan just might work. Maybe it won't. Maybe you'll be caught. But the witches didn't say anything about being caught; they said you'd be king! You've got to do it. There's a dagger in front of you. It's got blood flowing off of it. You reach for it, but you can't grab it. Is it a sign? It must be! You quietly enter Duncan's room. His sons are asleep in the next room. One of them wakes up! He's going to see you! You freeze. He goes back to sleep. You creep very softly into Duncan's room. Your feet feel heavy. You almost feel like you're watching yourself on TV. You stand over him and grab your dagger. You've killed people before. You can do this!*

### Scene 9: In the castle

*You're Lady Macbeth. Everywhere you look there's blood on the floor. It's the king's blood! Everyone's going to find out what you and your husband did! It wasn't supposed to be like this! If only you could go back in time and change it! What if you'd been able to have children? Where did everything go wrong? Oh, look, there's more blood! Your husband has murdered Duncan, his guards, his best friend Banquo, and Macduff's wife and children. You will never be innocent of all this death!*

## FINAL PROJECTS

Many of the projects should not be attempted without allowing the students some prior experience with the various projects offered. Video projects should be prefaced with a tutorial in how to use the camera. If students have some practice with these activities, it will ensure that things go smoother and give the instructor more time to focus on the play.

### Lesson 1: Video Project

#### *Objective*

The goal of the video project is to produce a students directed and student acted performance of a scene from *Macbeth*. The students use an artistic vision to develop not only the expression used by the actors in their various roles, but also to guide their decisions about costumes, props, and settings. This project can be as elaborate or as simple as the instructor's resources afford.

#### *Materials Needed*

A digital video camera and an editing program, such as iMovie. The students will need copies of the script, paper for storyboarding, and whatever props or costumes they envision.

#### *Procedure*

First, students select the group they want. Assigning groups can lead to disagreements and students need to have the security of being in control of their project. Then they select a scene from the play that works for their group. Some scenes can have characters amended, such as townspeople, crowd members, etc. After these choices have been made, students discuss their vision. The next step is the creation of storyboards. In order for each member of the group to feel that they are contributing, it's important for each student to create some storyboards. The students can look at all the various ideas and decide (with the help of the instructor) which shots to use. The instructor should encourage them to use a variety, including close-ups, over-the-shoulder shots, or shooting up from the floor. Students need copies of their scene to help them

learn their lines. Luckily, a video performance doesn't rely on massive amounts of memorization. Students need to be familiar, but can refer to their scripts during the filming. Costumes and prop selections follow, along with the selection of any special effects required (a fog machine, for example). After a couple of dress run-throughs, the group should be ready to tape. They should be encouraged to use as many takes as time allows, in order to lay the foundation for a productive editing process. If time allows, let the group use the benefit of watching their "dailies" so they can improve their filming and acting.

During the editing process, students may require additional guidance from the instructor, particularly if they are not familiar with the editing program. The iMovie program is easy to learn and user-friendly. This is where students can add the soundtrack, sound effects, and filters (depending on the capabilities of your editing program).

When preparing the video for public viewing, it may be necessary for students to add an introduction that sets up the clip. Explaining the back-story or prologue (a la *Star Wars*) will help audiences unfamiliar with the play to have the necessary background knowledge to understand the context.

## Lesson 2: Costume Design

### *Objective*

Small group of students will create a costume plot for several of the characters from *Macbeth*. They will produce a rendering for each costume, which includes fabric swatches, and if possible, they will design one of the costumes to be actually worn.

### *Materials Needed*

Students will need white paper with a croquis, colored pencils, pastels, crayons, and markers. Various scraps of old clothes or fabric swatches. Scissors and glue.

### *Procedure*

The group can be anywhere from one to three persons. The biggest problem facing students who take on this project will be their unfamiliarity with the significance of costuming. The teacher should prompt the students to consider Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's character arcs as they design the costumes they wear at the beginning of the play as opposed to what they wear by the end. The students need to understand that colors and textures communicate mood and feeling. Some of this is already hard-wired into their brains, they just need to be aware of it. Time period accuracy should not be an issue. Please provide them as many illustrations of various costume styles as possible to inspire ideas. The students should be reminded to follow their vision.

After they have sketched and colored the costumes, it's important to engage the students in discussions about their choices and see if there are ways in which they can improve their designs. After these changes, the students will attach fabric swatches to their sketches that represent the kind of fabric that would be used in the costume. Old clothes can provide fabric swatches, as well as an assortment of fabrics, patterns, and textures.

As a final step, students should select one design and actually produce the costume and model it for the class. When they present the whole design to the class, they should explain their concept and justify their choices.

## Lesson 3: Set Design

### *Objective*

A small group of students will go through the process of designing a set for a production of *Macbeth*. Their artistic vision will help them decide things such as color and style, and the script

will dictate the specifics of what the stage needs.  To simplify things, one scene can be selected, as opposed to the whole play.

*Materials Needed*

Students will need white paper, ¼ inch grid paper, colored pencils, pastels, crayons, and markers.  For the model, students will need a 2 x 3 foot piece of foam-board, Exacto knives, construction paper, paint, found items, and glue.

*Procedure*

Several steps will need to be completed.  First is the formation of groups.  Groups of two or three are ideal.  Students should have access to a variety of set design examples.  The internet, stage design books, and theatre history books are excellent resources.  Preliminary sketches should be made by everyone in the group to ensure everyone's participation.  After the group discusses and decides on a final design, a ground plan is made, using the ¼-inch grid paper.  Each student should be required to produce a ground-plan, because this is where they will begin to learn about and apply the concept of 'scale.'  The making of the model will require the most time.  It's a good idea to collect some cardboard boxes, card-stock, scrap pieces of foam-board, and found items.  Once the model is complete, the group presents it to the class and explains their vision and the reasons behind their choices of design and color.

**Lesson 4: Graphic Novel**

*Objective*

The students will create a graphic novel of the play (or scenes from the play).  They have the freedom to choose the layout and character types, as well as copying the language from the script, or paraphrasing.

*Materials Needed*

The students will need white paper, colored pencils, pastels, crayons, and markers.

*Procedure*

This assignment, while called a graphic novel can have a couple of different formats.  It can be a storybook or a comic book using pre-existing characters.  The classic example I give to students is if they were to design a storybook for *Macbeth* using characters from *The Simpsons*.  Which Simpson's characters would be cast in each role?  Why is that a good choice?  The end product should be a bound book with illustrations that tell the *Macbeth* story, but may transplant it into another time or place, or even into the realm of an animated series like *The Simpsons* or *Family Guy*.

Students who demonstrate artistic abilities will be the most successful.  Most students in middle school are aware of their artistic abilities (or lack thereof) and will not select this option if they feel they can't draw.  Those feelings should be respected.  For those who are capable and know they're capable, this assignment can be a lot of fun.  Groups should not exceed three students and can be as few as one.

The first step involves the production of the layout.  This will be a new idea and will require some visual examples of what they can choose to do.  The layout is how a page is set up.  A comic book will use a series of boxes for each picture, or a storybook might put one picture on each page with a block of text.  Once a decision is made, the group will need about 20 pages of layout.  After the layout is finished, the text should go in.  If the project is a comic book, then the text and illustrations can be done together.  In either case, the last two things to happen are the illustrations and the cover.  Students should plan to present their books to the class and give a brief summary of what they did.

## CONCLUSION

Too often the mistake teachers make with ELL students is thinking that they have to lower their standards and resort to stodgy teaching practices like piling on worksheets. Projects like these are important in that they offer hands-on opportunities to stimulate creative thinking, which is something worksheets can't offer. These lesson plans were intended to be flexible and structured to meet the various needs of all students regardless of whether or not they're ELL, Special Ed., Vanguard, or regular. These projects may not necessarily foster an appreciation for Shakespeare, but hopefully they will awaken students to their own creative abilities.

**ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**Works Cited**

Cullum, Albert, Dr. *Shakespeare in the Classroom: Plays for the Intermediate Grades*.

Fearon Teacher Aids, Frank Schaffer Publications, Inc. 1995.
> Eight Shakespeare plays are included in this book, along with vocabulary guides. The cuttings keep the main plot intact and the language is similar to the original Shakespeare texts.

Hepburn, H. P. C. *Deep Processing, Drama and Poetry. Viewpoints*. 1993.
> This essay describes the advantages of using Deep Processing to facilitate students' emotional response to poetry. It includes some poems in the appendices for use in the classroom.

**Supplemental Resources**

*Web Sources*

*Anakin Skywalker: The Tragic Hero*. 2 May 2005. <http://anakinskywalker1.homestead.com/thetragichero.html>.

This website lists characteristics of a tragic hero and how they relate to Anakin Skywalker from the *Star Wars* prequels, to *Macbeth*. It outlines the psychological stages a character goes through in his/her descent into the darkside.

Friedlander, Ed. M.D. *Enjoying "Macbeth," by William Shakespeare.* 19 April 2005.
> <http://www.pathguy.com/macbeth.htm.>
> This website contains a disclaimer, and rightfully so. The information consists of gory details about the play, but it's useful to have as an enrichment guide when reading the play with the students.

Miller, Rich. *Machomer.* 1 July 2005. <http://www.machomer.com>.
> <http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca/anthology/MacHomerScriptMarch232001.pdf>.
> *MacHomer* is a one-man show written and performed by Rich Miller. The first website is the one for his show and the link to the pdf file is a copy of the script.

*Teacher Resources*

*Best Practices Used in Language Acquisition: Secondary.* Houston Independent School District, Multilingual Department. 2002.
> This guide presents sections on vocabulary development, writing strategies, and reading strategies. Intended for ESL students, this guide very simply describes the various activities used to aid reading comprehension.

Birmingham, Peter & Chris Davies. "Storyboarding Shakespeare: Learners' Interactions with Storyboard Software in the Process of Understanding Difficult Literary Texts." *Journal of Information Technology for Teacher Education,* Vol. 10, No. 3, 2001.
> Even though this article serves as a marketing tool for the Kar2ouche storyboarding computer program, it includes evidence supporting the idea that storyboarding, with or without Kar2ouche, can benefit learning.

Cullum, Albert, Dr. *Shakespeare in the Classroom: Plays for the Intermediate Grades*.

Fearon Teacher Aids, Frank Schaffer Publications, Inc. 1995.
> Eight Shakespeare plays are included in this book, along with vocabulary guides. The cuttings keep the main plot intact and the language is similar to the original Shakespeare texts.

Gilbert, Reta A. *From Writing to Media with Literature in EFL*. 1993.
> This teacher's guide offers strategies for incorporating video into the teaching of Shakespeare. The various films are to be used along with the text. The music from the films is also analyzed.

Gusman, Jo.  *Practical Strategies for Accelerating the Literacy Skills and Content Learning of Your ESL Students*.
2003.
There are many helpful handouts in this book which can be used to supplement the lessons, depending on the level of your students.  There are many practical ideas and reproducible graphic organizers.

***Video Resources***

*Shakespeare: The Animated Tales, Vol. 4*.  Ambrose DVD, Ambrose Video Publishing, Inc. New York.  2004.
There are three plays on this volume, *Macbeth*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *Romeo & Juliet*.  The cutting the script uses closely follows the Fearon text, so it makes for a great supplement and a way to introduce images to the students to match the play.

*The Tragedy of Macbeth*. Directed by Roman Polanski. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment. 1971. (140 minutes)
Parts of this are suitable for viewing in the classroom, and some are not.  This film should be previewed by the teacher before showing it to a class.  It does help provide some images for the play.

*Throne of Blood*. Directed by Kurosawa. Criterion Collection. 1957. (105 minutes)
This version of Macbeth sets the play within the context of Japanese Samurais.