

The Great Vowel Shift – The Great English Movement

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INTRODUCTION

Ironically, it was the study of Italian that truly piqued my interest in linguistics and the study of the English language. From elementary school through my senior year of high school, I always found English to be my favorite subject but never cared enough to study the language itself. The textbooks that were afforded us would contain stories from the Old and Middle English time periods, but the language was shifted into a more modern text to assist with student understanding of general concepts. It was walking into a foreign language (specifically Italian) class that sparked my interest in a knowledge of languages. When a student is taught a “foreign language” in American schools, the teacher spends a majority of the time focused upon learning the background of the language such as: prefixes, suffixes, and word roots. As a Romance Language, Italian, as I learned it, taught me more about the Latin base of English than about Italian.

I took this new knowledge and searched for a similar study of English. Albeit deemed almost automatic to Americans, we at one time or another learned the English language. No one person is born with a specific language; with that in mind the learner must have at some point come to understand the suffixes, prefixes, and roots which are the building blocks of the language in which I write this curriculum unit in today: American English. I specify “American” not out of some blind patriotism but rather the fact that through the overarching evolution of the English language, we, as Americans, through massive additions of slang terms have developed our own section of the language. While American English is divided into a multitude of dialects, the specifics are moot in this lesson; without the diversity of the language starting in the Middle Ages, American English would not be what it is today.

I studied and received my degree in English and Creative Writing from the University of Houston and proudly took that degree to work in education to share my knowledge and on most occasions continue learning with my students. While Creative Writing inherently is the alteration of language for the purpose of art, it is only after understanding the language and having control of all aspects of it that a person can truly turn words into art. I express this verity with my students, and I hope the words fall true with anyone who uses the lesson plans included in this curriculum. Writing is the cornerstone of English, and words are the necessary tools of writers. Without the Germanic basis of Old English, the Anglo-Norman influence of Middle English, or the other languages, Romantic or Germanic that influenced our English today, the language would not have the diversity that it now enjoys.

I feel that it is necessary to have students take pride in their words and how they use them as well as knowing where they come from. Most of our language is based in a culture that is part of our students whether they are from Europe, Asia, Central America or otherwise, English has been influenced by them all.

ACADEMIC SETTING

The city of Houston is extremely diverse in its cultural make-up. Some high schools in this city have upwards of seventy different languages spoken in their hallways. The school where this lesson plan was developed fully accentuates and appreciates the cultural diversity of this city; Challenge Early College has students from every corner of Houston and every corner of the world attending our school. The student ability in any given classroom encompasses anywhere from a Gifted and Talented student with an uncanny understanding of language to an ELL (English Language Learner) student who, while intelligent, has the roadblock of understanding English before the concept is fully grasped. What some of the “Native Speakers” sometimes take for granted, the ELL learners work diligently towards. Sometimes I feel they have an advantage over the native speakers.

As I discussed in the introduction, the English language is taken for granted by many Americans who speak the language. The ELL students at my school have taken courses in learning the “foreign language” of English with a linguistic base of phonetics and technical construction of words and sentences. Native speakers, such as we have in our school, understand the language in the larger, sweeping style that is expected of them to grasp higher level cognitive thinking processes in their academic classes.

I hope that the students find the history of the language that our school system primarily teaches as fascinating as I do. With gusto for linguistics, I hope to stimulate interest in my students and lead them to try and understand where the words they speak come from. It is the understanding of Greek, Latin, Germanic, and other roots that their words and possibly culture have been based upon for generations.

This lesson plan is designed for a 9th Grade Pre-AP high school course which is a literature survey course covering everything from Greek Mythology to Contemporary American Fiction. The average student in my classroom has an upper level high school or better score on the Stanford Test which studies how students can perform in the classroom given the correct instruction. I feel that without the basis of knowledge from Old English to American English, the students will be missing out on an entire level of understanding and appreciating the aesthetics of literature. These students will be studying works such as *The Canterbury Tales* and *Beowulf* not in the 9th grade year but in the 11th and 12th grade years; with a strong background in linguistics the students should have a greater appreciation for these works.

UNIT OBJECTIVES

I am designing this unit around three primary objectives. First of all, the students will be able to look at an Old or Middle English text in a modern context and understand the work and the linguistic style in a Modern English format. Second, the students will be able to look at an Old or Middle English Text and while not fully understanding the language itself because it is a foreign language, be able to appreciate the aesthetics of the language and identify the shifts in sounds when hearing a recording of the text in a spoken word format of the Middle English language. Finally, the students will be able to look at a portion of text from the Middle English Era and the Modern English Era, whether it is American or Classical English, and identify similarities and differences in the aesthetics as well as how the words are pronounced today as opposed to the 13th or 14th Centuries.

Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills Objectives

The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills or TEKS are the statewide guidelines in Texas for student success on our standardized (TAKS) test. The linguistic aspect of the test, while it does not focus on the history of the language, rather focuses upon looking at two texts next to each other and analyzing the differences. That is the third of my objectives for this lesson.

Time Frame

The entire lesson in this curriculum is part of an overall larger curriculum. The basis of the lesson is the history of the English language as an entirety. The lesson is actually over a nine-week grading period that begins with Anglo-Saxon English then moves into Old English, Middle English, Early Modern English, Modern English and American English. The basis of this curriculum unit is the Middle English aspect of the overall lesson. Previous knowledge that students have in regard to the Old English and Anglo Saxon aspects of English are assumed in the lessons.

Activating prior knowledge

Before beginning the Middle English section, the students will have analyzed in a similar style to the way the Middle English text will be studied, a two-week Old English text analysis of a section of *Beowulf*. I tend to use a section of the story that normally is not included in the text that will be covered later on in their high school career. The students will look at texts written in Old English, Middle English and Modern English that allow the students to make connections on two levels to the language.

I will help the students in understanding by assisting them with multiple interpretations and translations that can be useful in their work. I will also assist the students with their hearing it correctly either through my personal pronunciations or a recording for students who are auditory learners to interpret the Middle and Old English.

Letter and Word Forms

The students will keep a continuous chart in their AP Journals (note-taking strategy) of letter forms that change over the course of the linguistic history. The largest change of course is the focus of this lesson plan that is the Great Vowel Shift in Middle English. The students will focus on the visual form of the letters as well as the sounding out of the letters.

To practice this, the students will write out the literal form of the letter as well as the phonetics of it. For example, the letter “ae” is highly utilized in Old and Middle English as a “long A” sound changes during the end period of the Middle Ages (Burrow and Turville-Petre 9-14). In their charts, the students will give examples of words that used the “ae” lettering, and write them out literally and phonetically as they are today. The students then will take words from today and incorporate the “ae” letter into our American English words to see how the shift would affect them.

Middle English and the Great Vowel Shift in the High School Classroom

The Great Vowel Shift of 1066 A.D. was the single greatest change in the history of the English language that is the official language today of over seventy-five countries (the United States not being one of them). This shift, which occurred after the Norman Conquest led by William the Conqueror, had the greatest impact on the oral tradition of the English language. As the title “The Great Vowel Shift” implies, this shifted the pronunciation of vowels from a softer to a harder sound. With the historical ramifications, this lesson plan can of course be correlated with a history class that is covering the Norman Conquest. On top of that, this lesson can also be incorporated into a language class, whether it is a Romance or Germanic Language base because both of these factions of English influence have been influenced by the Great Vowel Shift.

This unit is imperative to a high school curriculum because it is unfathomable to me how a student can study English from Kindergarten through 12th Grade and never have to study the history of the language. With every subject, whether it is math, science, history or otherwise, it is very important to understand the first steps in order to understand later steps. Therefore, I have never understood how I or any other teacher can teach a student English, if the children do not

understand where the language came from. That the students are fascinated with the shifts that have occurred throughout the evolution of this language shows me that the students need to understand why they pronounce the words that they use regularly as they do.

GREAT VOWEL SHIFT

Background

Included here is a brief background on The Great Vowel Shift for those who are unfamiliar of the changes that occurred at this time. First and foremost is the change that occurred with the letters “i” and “u.” Both of these letters became diphthongs, which are a complex speech sound or glide that begins with one vowel and gradually changes to another vowel within the same syllable, such as the “oi” in boil.

The letter “o” also went through many alterations as it began to take on multiple pronunciations. The letter “o” was no longer a solitary sound; rather it has shifted into the variants of the “oa” sound of a word such as “dome.” There is also the alteration of “o” with the longer version of it such as the double-o of “loose” or the long “o” of “lose” (Roseborough 36-47).

One of the greatest shifts of the time is the change that the letter “e” experienced from an oral and written fashion. The Great Vowel Shift led to the incorporation of the “long e” used in words such as: “green” and “yield.” The oral alteration is of course the extension of the letter with an “i” sound to it; the written word had to be altered to allocate this oral change. Therefore, words such as the examples written above with the “long e” had to either add an extra e or i before the original letter e in the word (Roseborough 36-47).

In relation to the ever-changing “e,” the letter “a” became very closely linked with “e” to make the “ae” sound. Otherwise known as a “long a” the “ae” sound is utilized in words such as “bake” and “take” which leads the speaker of the word to raise the inflection of his or her voice, unlike the “short a” which was oftentimes used before the Great Vowel Shift (Roseborough 36-47).

History

The Great Vowel Shift itself began in the 12th Century and lasted until the early part of the 18th Century. The primary focus of The Great Vowel Shift is the placement of the tongue in your mouth while pronouncing the long vowels of the language. It is a basic shift upwards, wherever the tongue would be placed for a “short e” for example would be moved up further along the palate of your mouth in order to pronounce the newer “long e”. The discovery of the Great Vowel Shift is credited to Otto Jespersen, who assigned eight basic steps to the overall shift of the language:

- Step 1: i and u drop and become ei and eu
- Step 2: e and o move up, becoming i and u
- Step 3: a moves forward to ae
- Step 4: short e becomes e and e becomes o
- Step 5: ae moves up to e
- Step 6: e moves up to i; a new e was created in Step 4; now that e moves up to i
- Step 7: short e moves up to e; the new e created in Step 5 moves up to e
- Step 8: ei and eu drop to ai and au (Menzer 1).

These previously mentioned steps did not occur all at the same time; they were dependent on the region and ages of the speakers. The younger generation often adjusted their language more to the Great Vowel Shift than the members of the elder generation.

Terminology

The actual definition of a long vowel is that it takes twice as long as a short vowel to pronounce. However, in modern teaching oftentimes tense vowels will be referred to as long vowels, which is an incorrect distinction. Long vowels have a very lax or passive sound to them, while the tense vowels are, as the name may imply, with a greater tension in the pronunciation and extreme articulation by the speaker. A tense vowel can be a long vowel; however not all tense vowels are long, while all long vowels are not necessarily tense vowels. The major impact of the Great Vowel Shift is that ironically two of the main shifts of The Great Vowel Shift become moot points. First of all, English is not a phonemic or phonetic language so the length of the vowels in written form ceases to be important in modern English literature. The spelling system that is incorporated in English, unlike around the time of the Great Vowel Shift does not match the vowel system that we have now. English, during the Medieval Era was closely correlated with the vowel sound, therefore making the Great Vowel Shift a necessity; today with the plethora of silent letters, vowels have become less important (Wolfe 14-19).

Physical Differences

The primary difference in the Great Vowel Shift is the physical location of the words within the palate of the mouth for your tongue to go to form the letter. The three locations in the mouth that letters are formed post-Great Vowel Shift are the front of the mouth, the middle of the mouth, and the back of the mouth. These same vowels are also distinguished by the inflection in the speakers' voice: high medium or low, for effectively pronouncing the vowels.

Beginning with the back of the mouth, from where a majority of the language during the Medieval Era was spoken, it holds only high and mid level vowels. The focus of the back of the mouth on the high end is the letter "u" which has an extended "oo" sound to it, although that wasn't officially done until after the Great Vowel Shift. As one could assume if the high end is the "u", then the middle end of the back of the mouth is the "o," namely the short sound such as "oh" (Rogers 1).

The central portion of the mouth only holds two vowels, one of which is not used in modern language. The other important factor is that the vowels only lay on the middle and lower end of the spectrum, as opposed to the front and back ends of the tongue which both hold high vowels. The first vowel included in the central portion of the tongue is the short "a" sound, which is more of the "ah" sound when being spoken. It is the only vowel set in the low end of the mouth and the center of the tongue because it's lack of a stronger edge to the sound makes it very passive (Rogers 1).

The only other vowel formed in this section of the tongue is the "ae" which transitioned into the "long a" sound of today (Rogers 2). This is the only vowel formed in the center of the mouth and the center of the tongue because of it's distinctive sound it takes a great deal of effort for pronunciation. Although the students may not think pronouncing vowels is a difficult activity, by the end of this section they may think differently.

The final section of the vowel shift is the front of the tongue, which holds only high and middle ended vowels. As could be deciphered from the previous information, the letters "i" and "e" are the ones utilized from the front end of the tongue. The vowel, "e," which before the Great Vowel Shift focused more upon the "eh" sound, is located in the center of the mouth and the front of the tongue (Rogers 3). This is because the sound much like the "a" earlier is a passive sound which does not require much movement of the tongue.

The letter "I," in this case is more of the "ai" sound instead of the "ee" which came after the Great Vowel Shift. Being located at the front of the tongue and the upper section of the mouth,

this letter proves to be the most work for pronunciation, as it is almost a verbal diphthong (Rogers 3).

Literature

Chaucer

Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is considered by many high school's English courses the primary text of the Middle Ages. While a majority of the texts that can be found in English after the Anglo-Norman invasion are charters that William the Conqueror issued, monastic chronicles such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and assorted literary works such as *The Song of Roland* and other epic poetry written in Anglo-Norman, it is Chaucer's work that is utilized as a model for Middle English texts. The Great Vowel Shift had a profound impact upon his literature because he needed to adjust the words to rhyme when shared orally. For example, the line "Whan that aprill with his shourse soote/The droughte of march hath perced to the roote," of course in modern English the language is different. The word "root" first of all removed the "e" from the end and the "o" has become a long vowel. The word "soote" has not transferred into Modern English; therefore, the rhyme scheme of the line is irregardless (Menzer 2). Another line, "And bathed every eveyne in swich licour/Of which vertu engendred is the flour," the use of the letter "u" in two words of this couplet take different approaches. The "u" in "licour," which is of course the modern "liquor," becomes short and takes on more of the qualities of the "o" which follows it. However, the "u" in "flour" or the modern "flower" becomes a diphthong, where the "u" is the primary vowel with the "o" leading into it. This transformed into the Modern English "w" which is in the word "now." A final example of Chaucer's language having to change in regard to the Great Vowel Shift is, "And smale foweles maken melodye,/That slegen al the nyght with open ye." First of all, after the Great Vowel Shift, the letter "e" on the end of "melodye" was dropped, and the "o" remained short to get the word "melody" which is still utilized today. The word "ye" at the end of the quote has actually been translated into the modern word, "eye." This change marked one of the great impacts of the Great Vowel Shift as the "e" sound at the end of the word took on the form of "ai" in pronunciation, therefore, changing the word forever (Menzer 4).

Overall, it is the shifts in the vowel sounds that so greatly altered Chaucer's work. Most of the intended rhyme scheme of Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* is rendered useless now, because with the shifts in the language, Chaucer was forced to either change the entire integrity of the line or leave it as unrhymed (which a majority of them remained). Ironically, Chaucer probably began his education in French, because at the time of his youth, most of the classes were being taught in French (the language spoken in England in the 14th century). The primary difference in the way Chaucer wrote and the oral shifts of the time was the phonology from a 14th Century London dialect to a more modern movement based heavily in the Romance languages.

William Shakespeare

Before I start the background on this portion of the unit, I feel that I must clarify the fact that I realize William Shakespeare is not a Medieval writer, rather a Renaissance writer. However, the inclusion of Shakespeare in this unit serves a two-fold purpose: first of all, the students feel a familiarity with Shakespeare that they rarely do with other writers. This makes any allusions to Shakespeare beneficial for the teachers in order to gauge previous knowledge of the students, as well as allow the students to set their expectations for the unit. Second of all, Shakespeare's puns (which were such a significant part of his writing style) are often set in classic Middle English dialect that of course was altered by the Great Vowel Shift. However, Shakespeare failed to take this into account in his writing, therefore his rhyme scheme was greatly harkened by the variants that had moved upon the English language during the Great Vowel Shift. The first of the puns comes from a speech by the character Falstaff in *Henry IV* where there is a play on the words

“reason” and “raisin,” “If *Reasons* were as plenty as Blackberries,/I would give no man a *Reason* upon compulsion, I.” The pun is of course the playing between raisins and blackberries that of course are related albeit distantly in regard to food (Menzer 6). The reason for the pun’s success in regard to humorous banter is that the word “reason” before the Great Vowel Shift would have had the “ea” take on an “ai sound and the “o towards the latter portion of the word takes the short form of the “o” which sounds similar to the post-Great Vowel Shift “short e.” A second and final example of Shakespeare’s playing with the language for intention of a pun which was influenced by the Great Vowel Shift came from a dialogue between Theseus (the Duke), Demetrius and Lysander in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*:

DEMETRIUS: No Die, but an *ace* for him; for he is but one.

LYSANDER: Lesse then an *ace* man. For he is dead, he is nothing.

DUKE: With the helpe of a Surgeon, he might yet recover, and prove an *Asse*.

The overuse of the word “ass” is possibly based upon the fact that it was one of Shakespeare’s favorite words due to the fact that his typical audience enjoyed the crude humor of it. The other reason that the word is utilized in this quote is the pronunciation of the “a” at the beginning of the word “asse” is the “ae” sound, therefore, making it sound more like “ace.” Regarding the “e” on the end of “asse,” it was once again omitted because of the short sounding “e” (Menzer 6).

THE NORMAN CONQUEST

The Norman Conquest of 1066 led by William the Conqueror, who was the Duke of Normandy, lasted eighteen days for the entire invasion. This single event was the driving factor behind the Great Vowel Shift. The Conquest began when William, with seven hundred ships, landed at Pevensey completely unopposed. The invasion was a reaction to the naming of Earl Harold Godwinson of Wessex as King of England after King Edward the Confessor had promised the crown to William. The second day the invasion led to the Normans building a castle on the ruins of an old Roman fort that served as a stronghold for the remainder of their invasion. Meanwhile the English army was trying to reassemble in order to attack the Norman invaders. The third day led to the Norman army shifting their base to the city of Hastings, which was a better center for an invasion. It was the swiftness of their move that was so astounding to the English; the Normans were, therefore, allowed to take Hastings without resistance.

After taking over Hastings, the Normans began to pillage the surrounding areas of Sussex and Wessex, which was taken personally by King Harold. He had grown up in the area, as well as being the earl of Wessex and Sussex. William hoped that his strategy of defacing Harold’s home would lead Harold to a preliminary attack with an incomplete army, and give the Normans a great advantage in their invasion. For the next few days, Normans did not pursue any great invasions because they were awaiting Harold’s premature attack. Meanwhile, King Harold had amassed an army of 1,500 royal soldiers, as well as pulling volunteers along the way. The largest issue he faced was the fact that not more than a few weeks prior, these same English warriors had thwarted an invasion by the Vikings, who were deemed far more savage than the Normans. While the troops were coming from all over England, it would take awhile for them to reach the Normans. Once they did, the Normans were prepared with cavalry, which was a great disadvantage for the English, as they relied on infantry.

Midway through the invasion, King Harold sent his troops on to London, but he stopped at Waltham Abbey to pray, think and try to negotiate reasonably with William of Normandy. Harold sent a monk with the message confessing that he too recalled Edward promising the throne to William; however, Edward also promised the throne to Harold on his deathbed. Harold offered to let the English courts settle the case because it was set in England, but William refused and informed Harold that war would be inevitable. The Normans felt that God was fighting on

their side, and that William even had the support of the pope to take over England. William, who had become a duke at age seven, was considered by his followers to be a man of destiny who would inevitably take the throne from the “common blood” Harold. News soon hit England that King Harold has been excommunicated by the current pope, Alexander II. This served as a great moral blow to the English, considering that they credited having God on their side during their victory over the Vikings, it would only be with God’s help that they might overtake the Normans. Harold refused to recognize the excommunication until it came from an impartial source, but it did force him to move his army into battle sooner, because if the excommunication were confirmed, it would be the end of the English army. Harold’s brother Gyrth offered to take control of the English army for Harold to counteract the negative effects of the excommunication rumors. Gyrth told him that he had no interest in the throne other than being an Englishman who wanted to defend his country.

Harold refused the offer, citing his military victories over the Vikings and the Welsh, so he felt that his quick attack strategy that worked before would work again. King Harold, ten days in, ordered the march upon Hastings against all of his advisor’s wishes. They asked for 24 more hours when the archers, fyrds and thegns would arrive to reinforce their army; but Harold refused as he wanted to pin the Normans onto the peninsula where Hastings lies before they could spread further into England. Harold, moving upon Hastings, had brought his entire family with him, which was a bold move considering that a loss in this battle would leave England without a leader and completely vulnerable to the Norman’s conquest.

William of Normandy was elated to hear of the oncoming battle because it led right into his strategy. He knew that the English warriors would still be exhausted from their battles with the Vikings, and the tedious journey home. Also, since the Normans had been in England for two weeks, they had come to have a good understanding of the terrain and felt it was a “home field” for them even over the English. Harold, in his overconfidence, had also set up the English with no means of escape, so the battle would truly be all or nothing for the English. Harold’s strategy of a lightning attack fell short due to the fact that William was expecting that, and was well aware, through the reports of the scouts he had sent out, where and when the English were coming. Although some of the reinforcements had come to the English, putting their numbers slightly higher than the Normans, the Norman warriors were better rested and their cavalry were much more skilled warriors than the warriors of the English army.

On October 14, the Normans and English battled at Hastings. Early on the English had the distinct advantage when the Norman archers were foiled and appeared to be rendered useless before the English shields; and even the Norman cavalry was ineffective because fighting uphill rendered their strength moot. William however began a strategy of attacking and pulling back, which led a more undisciplined English army to chase them. Soon the Norman archers were able to shoot effectively, and the infantry and cavalry of the Normans could make headway against the English army. When all was done, King Harold had been killed by an arrow through his eye and his brother Gyrth lay dead as well. This meant that there was no one to stand in the way of William marching into London and proclaiming himself king of England. The conquerors spoke French and came to issue all government documents in Latin (after an initial spate of documents in Old English), which practices initiated the Great Vowel Shift.

While the aftermath was a plethora of battles throughout England, the focus of this lesson plan is on the actual linguistic shift. If there is a great deal of interest in further study of the actual Norman Conquest, it would be a great opportunity for the English teacher to co-teach with a history teacher, allowing the history teacher to focus on the battles themselves as well as the social climate. This frees the English teacher up to focus on the actual linguistics instead of the historical actions. Any additional time would be beneficial to show students more works such as

essays, religious doctrine (taught only from a linguistic standpoint) and poetry that was from the Medieval era and affected by the Great Vowel Shift.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson One: Middle English versus American English

This lesson is intended to help the students understand which words they use today were set in the Medieval era, and that were affected by the Great Vowel Shift. This introductory lesson allows the students to hear the words as well as see how they were written in Middle English, and then through setting up hypothesis, the students distinguish what the Modern American English word is. This lesson lasts one class period of 90 minutes or two 45-minute class periods.

Materials

Each student will need a piece of construction paper which is set up in a T-Chart. For the interest of the student I let them use two different colored markers to distinguish the Middle English word from the Modern English word. Other materials needed are an overhead projector, a computer to access the webpage with the auditory samples, speakers, and a white board to project the image onto.

Objectives

The student will learn to recognize difference in the characters of Middle English and Modern English, listen for nuances in the pronunciation of words from Middle English as opposed to Modern English, and learn the roots of many of the words they use today.

Prior Knowledge

At this time the teacher will have already given some background information on Middle English. Since this is a smaller part of a nine-week unit on the entire history of the English language, the students will have also been introduced to Old English to use as a basis for their knowledge. The students should also have an understanding of the geography of the Medieval era and Middle English as the teacher has gone over that in regard to Old English as well.

Lesson

Have the students fill out a T-Chart on their construction paper. On the top of the left column have the students write ME for Middle English and on the top of the right column have the students write MnE for modern English. The teacher will put up the first word, for example, “Reasons,” and have the students write the word in whichever column they think this word belongs in, modern or Middle English. Then the teacher will play the recording of the word in the Middle English pronunciation “raisin” and have the students listen twice, then repeat it twice. The student will then hear the Modern English pronunciation for “reason,” listen twice, and then repeat it twice. The teacher will then have the students check which column they wrote the original word in. In this case, either column would be correct, since the language actually never shifted. Underneath the word though, the students should write down the sound shift (for the “ea” in the Middle English the student should write is “ai” for the sound effect).

Lesson Two: I Speak Middle English Pretty

This lesson is for the end of the first week where the students have developed a bit of an understanding of the aesthetic and auditory sounds of the Middle English Era. This lesson is important to both the student and teacher: the student gets to model his or her understanding of Medieval spoken and written words and the teacher gets to use auditory, visual and kinesthetics in his or her classroom so all types of learners can benefit.

Each student starts off with a block of text ten lines long from a section of *The Canterbury Tales* and *Beowulf*. The students will then read the texts in their original and translated forms. While there are multiple quality interpretations of *The Canterbury Tales*, I am slightly pickier about *Beowulf*, choosing the Seamus Heaney translation of the text for students to look at as a guide. The students will need paper, pen, an overhead projector and transparencies to present their interpretations to the class, a copy of an audio recording of the section they are reading over, and their AP Journals which have the linguistic charts.

The student will focus on learning how to look at a language and even if the words are not fully understood, appreciate the similarities and differences in the formation of the letters. Much as a student may look at Arabic and Hebrew and see the similarities and differences in the language, he may similarly see that the difference between the physical formation of the letters in Old and Middle English especially are similar. The students will also allow themselves to focus on the physicality of pronunciation, paying particular attention to the placement of their tongue in their mouth during pronunciation. This is an important aspect of the exercise because it is also the premise of the Great Vowel Shift. The students must also listen for nuances in the pronunciation of words from Middle English as opposed to Modern English. We are an auditory world; most of the languages today can be spoken more than written by a larger number of people. In listening to the distinctions of the words, the learner can find a greater understanding. Finally, the students will learn the roots of many of the words they use today. In making the text relevant to the learner by a connection to something they can use, the teacher will find a more productive student and a higher quality work product.

The students will have a familiarity with the *Beowulf* text because they will have worked on that same text when doing the Old English section of this assignment. The students will have also accumulated a multitude of notes and previous discussions that we as a class have had over Middle English and the intricacies of the Great Vowel Shift on the linguistic approach.

Students, who will be paired in groups of four, will then re-write the Old English text of *Beowulf* into Middle English and then Modern American English, keeping the continuity of the visual language on the page. The students will then do the same for *The Canterbury Tales*, but translate it into Old English and Modern American English, also for the aesthetic effect.

After doing this, the students will then have a little fun with it and interpret what is being said and translate it into a modern spoken dialect that they would use. This brings in an extra level of higher cognitive level thinking and lets the students truly enjoy what they are doing.

The students will then come up to the front of the class and have the transparencies ready with their original text, the translations and then the meaning of the translation. The students really seem to enjoy the next part where one of the students will read aloud the Old English translation, which will be translated into Middle English by the first “interpreter,” then translated into the phonetic modern English by a second “interpreter” until finally the last “interpreter” will translate it into modern American English, which the students really seem to get a kick out of. Since we are not reading for understanding but for phonetics, the students can interpret it any way and usually make very amusing translations.

Lesson Plan Three: The Great Vowel Un-Shift

This lesson is the final portion of the Middle English section of the history of the English language lesson. It is the highest level of thinking to be able to dissect a concept that has been learned, which is what this entire lesson is based upon. Simply put, the students will have to give a speech about what they have learned thus far with the catch being that they must use the vowels in the way they were used before the Great Vowel Shift. That is primarily the elimination of many of the long vowels and tense vowels that are such a large part of our linguistic make-up.

Each student will need paper, pen and their AP Journal to check for letter formations and grammatical forms.

This is the opportunity for the students to really experience the relevance of this assignment. Our school is very big on rigor and relevance of assignments; if our students don't feel that they are learning something from an assignment, then they will not put their full effort into it. The students, instead of just reflecting on what they've learned over the past two weeks, will instead really learn an appreciation for the evolution of the language. There is also a great deal of trust that goes into this activity, so it is very important to do this in a classroom that has built up trust between the students and the teacher. The teacher should definitely model the activity, allowing the students to possibly get any laughter out of the way at the teacher's expense. I only say this because the words will sound a bit ridiculous because of the way they are being spoken as opposed to the way we say the words now. It is also a wonderful experience for the students to feel more comfortable about presenting after seeing the teacher model it for them.

The students already will have a basis for this, as they will have spent the previous two weeks working on Middle English texts and listening to how they are pronounced with short letters. They will also have heard the way that other, more professional, speakers pronounce the words and have a basis to mimic their speech patterns, as many students find comfortable.

Students will work on their own to write out a three-quarter-page to one-page speech about what they have learned about their language and how it is spoken and came to exist. After writing the essay, the students should practice reading it aloud in their normal, everyday dialect to become comfortable with the text.

The next step is that the student should sound out the vowels and write them out phonetically, which will allow him or her to practice further with the text. The reason behind having the students write it out phonetically is that even if the students can identify the vowels written out in the Medieval form, when reading to the class the phonetic sounds written out on the page will help them concentrate on the sounds and the clarity of the words.

The students will then be asked to volunteer to go up in front of the class and share their essays, and focusing once again on the pronunciation, tell the class what they've learned. The student will include a transparency with the actual essay written out with the Medieval text so that the other students can enjoy the aesthetics.

CONCLUSION

Often teachers have failed to think outside the box, or more importantly outside of the Teacher's Edition, to find a subject that the students will really want to learn. It is not the teacher's fault, for we are stuck in a time that is focused more on test scores and less on learning than ever before, cutting our time for classroom instruction down severely. This leaves us all unsure on how to express knowledge effectively, which may not seem pertinent at the time but is very beneficial to the students' success as high level thinkers. We have a responsibility to send the students off to the universities of the world as strong thinkers with a wide array of knowledge from a varied curriculum. It is more than knowing what happened, where it happened, who it happened to, why it happened or when it happened; the students must understand how events happen and how it shapes their world, all coming back to relevance.

The unit is put together around these two important learning factors. I hope that by teaching these students that they will have a greater appreciation for the language they and their friends speak. It is also my hope that, as an average of seven new words are added to the dictionary each year, these students will be in the forefront of neology and find new words to express ourselves through future generations.

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