# Effects of a Multimodal Approach on EFL University Students' Attitudes Toward Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet

Amy L. Freyn, Ed.D.
School of Languages, Universidad Internacional del Ecuador, Quito, Ecuador

Sandra Gross, Ed.D.
School of Languages, Universidad Internacional del Ecuador, Quito, Ecuador

**Abstract**
Teaching William Shakespeare's plays has long been argued as too difficult for ESL/EFL learners. However, Shakespeare can be considered a valuable and authentic material for teaching language learners and teaching Shakespeare's plays in the language classroom can lead to a meaningful language learning experience. This study examined the implementation of a multimodal teaching approach to teaching *Romeo and Juliet* in an ESL/EFL university classroom in Ecuador, and whether this approach would improve students' attitudes toward reading Shakespeare.
**Index Terms**: multimodal teaching, teaching Shakespeare, language teaching, teaching Romeo and Juliet

## I. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE
### A. Literature in the EFL Classroom
Several researchers have argued the effectiveness of the use of literature in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom (Duff & Maley, 1991; Hill, 1986; Lazar, 1993; Liaw, 2001; McKay, 1982; Pugh, 19889; Van, 2009). The criticisms of the use of literature in EFL classes include the structural complexity of literature (McKay, 1982), which is often beyond the students' proficiency levels (Bassnett & Grundy, 1993), and the specific cultural viewpoints found in literature that may be problematic or conceptually difficult for EFL students to grasp (McKay, 1982). Literature, however, provided the main source and method of language teaching in the nineteenth century when the most popular language technique was the Grammar Translation Method. At this time, literature provided additional grammar and vocabulary learning, as well as practice in translation (Liaw, 2001). With the arrival of structuralism, the audiolingual method, and communicative language teaching, literature was essentially discarded as a language teaching source, until it was renewed in the mid-1980s (Duff & Maley, 1991). This resurgence can be confirmed by the numerous publications at the time, which advocated for the use of literature in language classes (Maley, 1989).

The research has provided ample arguments in favor of the use of literature in EFL classes. McKay (1982) summarized various advantages: literature develops linguistic knowledge, increases motivation and reading proficiency, and expands students' understanding of culture. Van (2009) argued that studying literature in the EFL class helps provide meaningful context, which enhances creativity and strengthens critical thinking. Ghosn (2002) described literature as a highly motivating and authentic input for language learning that helps to foster emotional intelligence. According to Langer (1997), literature allows students to reflect on their lives, learning, and language. Hadaway, Vardell, and Young (2002) examined three advantages of using literature in EFL classrooms: the contextualization of language (learners become familiar with the use of language in various situations through literature), the social and affective factors (which make literature relevant for all students), and the natural and meaningful use of language (which stems from the use of descriptive language in literature).

The three traditional models for teaching literature described by Carter and Long (1991) are the cultural model, the language-based approach, and the personal growth model. The cultural model deals with literary work in relation to culture (social, political, historical). The language-based approach focuses on linguistic features, such as vocabulary and grammatical structures, while the personal growth model involves students' personal and emotional experiences and making a meaningful connection to literary work. Combining key elements from all three of these models, Savvidou (2004) suggested an integrated approach as more suitable to teaching literature in the EFL classroom. For the purpose of this study, however, a multimodal teaching approach will be examined.

### B. Multimodal Teaching Approach
A multimodal teaching approach can be a source of originality and ingenuity and can reinforce students' learning of a foreign language. The New London Group (1996) coined the term "multimodality" when they discussed the changing ways of communication due to new technologies. The group, composed of eleven linguists, argued for a much broader view of literacy than the traditional printed text and advocated for a new approach to engage students and use all available resources, especially multimedia technologies (New London Group, 1996). Kress (2003) asserted that very soon the screen will govern all of our communication practices. Jewitt (2006) explained modalities as different modes of expression—aural, visual, gestural, spatial, and linguistic. These different

modalities unite in a digital environment in ways that reshape the printed word and image or sound (Jewitt, 2006). This merger allows for imagination, meaning making, and can enhance the learning environment. Through technology induced interactions, multimodality provides resources and opportunities that challenge the traditional forms of communication and teaching. According to Watson and Pecchioni (2011), "the use of multimodal learning techniques is becoming more widespread within academia as the new media become a greater influence in everyday life and as digital technologies become more readily accessible" (p. 307).

A text, whether in print or nonprint, that has more than one mode of semiotic representation is broadly considered as a multimodal one (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). When a teacher presents material through a variety of modes then students are inspired to develop a more versatile approach to learning (Morrison, Sweeney, & Heffernan, 2003). Relying just on the printed text is a limited and confining approach. According to the New London Group (1996), teachers must expand and include new teaching approaches that focus on a pedagogy of multiliteracies, which "by contrast, focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone" (p. 64). Examples of multimodal teaching include the blending of visual and print media, writing and editing wikis, kinetic typography, virtual gaming, hyperlinked texts/stories, audio and video recordings, and digital storytelling. Xerri (2012) argued that "the notion of multimodality redefines pedagogy because learning itself is reconceptualised, partly because of the impact of new technologies" (p. 508). A multimodal teaching approach is worthy of consideration as an integrated strategy to be implemented in EFL classrooms.

*C. EFL Students' Attitudes Towards Literature*

Few studies have focused on EFL students' attitudes toward literature. Hirvela and Boyle (1988) surveyed EFL adult learners' attitudes toward university literature classes offered in a part-time degree program. The purpose of their study was to find out which literary genres were most favored or feared by the students and what aspects of literature were the most challenging. Results of their research showed the students most enjoyed prose fiction (novel and short story) and most feared poetry. The students viewed the interpretation of theme as most difficult when studying literature. Akyel and Yalcin (1990) investigated senior high school EFL students' perceptions of literature (novels, short stories, poetry, and drama) and concluded that the students viewed the novel as the most effective literary form to enhance linguistic skills and cultural awareness, and perceived drama as most effective in improving oral expression. The study also showed that students felt poetry and short stories had the least effect on their language skills development.

Tseng's (2010) study of senior high school EFL students surveyed their perceptions of literature and showed that most of the students held a positive attitude towards the literature introduced in class. Out of the four genres presented, most students preferred prose fiction (novel and short stories) and plays to poems. A second finding was that students favored the literary works they could enjoy in other media. Lastly, the study revealed that the students preferred contemporary literature to classic literature. In a similar study, but with university EFL students, Yilmaz (2012) also found that a majority of the students held very positive attitudes towards literature. In total, 80 percent of the students reported the study of literature as personally rewarding. Again, most students preferred prose fiction to plays and poems, which is consistent with previous studies.

*D. Shakespeare in the EFL Classroom*

Little research has been conducted on the use of Shakespeare in the EFL classroom. Database searches only revealed a handful of research articles on the topic. Cull (2003) argued that Shakespeare should be restored to the EFL syllabus. There may be pedagogical difficulties presented by the language of Shakespeare, especially with the use of linguistic features, idioms and imagery; however, Cull (2003) contended that "Advanced EFL learners are not significantly any more disadvantaged than their native speaking counterparts when confronted by Shakespearean English" (p. 78). The teaching approaches selected are critical to successful understanding of Shakespeare by EFL learners. Teaching approaches range from parallel-text editions, graphic novels, film adaptations, drama performances, and close reading (Shoemaker, 2013). Using a "variety of teaching methods will facilitate the development of both passion and comprehension for all students" (Shoemaker, 2013, p. 114).

Using Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as an example, Healy (2010) presented eight reasons why the play is an excellent choice for EFL learners:

1.  "It is a great story, a traditional tale where boy meets girl and falls in love, but their families are quarrelling and this love story ends in tragedy. Most people are able to respond to and enter into a story through the 'suspension of disbelief' as described by literary theorists.
2.  William Shakespeare's dramatic works provide us with cultural, historical and social information about Europe in 17th century.
3.  Shakespeare is universally regarded as one of the greatest writers in history.
4.  In the story, or plot, Romeo and Juliet, the protagonists, are a similar age to university students, and so they can easily relate to them.
5.  This play portrays several of the human emotions common to every era and culture such as love, hate, conflict and violence.
6.  The themes running through the play are timeless; e.g. battles of will between parents and their children,

secret love, family feuds, etc.

7. There are many film versions and written texts based on the story, both old and new. Therefore plenty of material to capture the imagination of modern students.
8. A huge variety of specific teaching resources are available" (p.182-183).

Healy (2010) concludes that with the "careful selection of texts, tasks, and activities," literature, such as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* can be used successfully with all ages and English proficiency levels (p. 189).

## II. RESEARCH PURPOSE

Studying literature, especially William Shakespeare, can be challenging for second language learners. Most of the studies regarding Shakespeare in the classroom have been conducted with native speakers. Very little research about reading Shakespeare in the classroom has been conducted with foreign language learners. No research has been directed toward using a multimodal approach to teaching Shakespeare to EFL students. This study aims at investigating Ecuadorian university students' attitudes toward Shakespeare using a multimodal teaching approach in English language class.

*A. Methodology*

*B. Participants*

The participants of this study were 25 university students at a small private university in Ecuador in a B2 level English class. All students were undergraduate students with majors in business, mechatronics, engineering, biology, diplomacy, or tourism. There were 8 female students and 17 male students, ranging in age from 19 to 28 years. All of the students speak Spanish as their native language. Eleven of the students reported that they had never read any of William Shakespeare's plays, while 13 students had read a Shakespeare play in Spanish. Only one student reported to have read a Shakespeare play in both Spanish and English. There were 2 English classes in total.

*C. Instrumentation*

Two instruments were used to gather the data for this study. The first instrument was an attitude questionnaire designed by the researcher for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire consisted of eleven Likert Scale questions regarding the students' attitudes toward the effectiveness of reading Shakespeare in improving English skills (writing, grammar, reading, and listening). The questionnaire was first piloted with thirty students within the same age group and English level as the participants in the study. Data from the pilot test of the questionnaire using Cronbach alpha formula yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.76, which is above the 0.70 threshold for acceptable reliability.

The second instrument was a questionnaire with open-ended questions with the students at the end of the research to better capture their perceptions and attitudes regarding the multimodal teaching approach to Shakespeare in English language class.

*D. Procedures*

Students were given the pre-assessment questionnaire to measure their attitudes toward reading Shakespeare in the English language classroom. Over the next four weeks of lessons, the students studied Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" in varying multimodal approaches. A side-by-side version of the play (by "No Fear Shakespeare") was used. The modern English side was used mostly for reading out loud in class, while the original version was used for the multimodal activities. The researcher redesigned the four week "Romeo and Juliet" curriculum from a traditional approach to a multimodal approach. In a traditional approach it is common to have lecture-led discussion and close readings of the play. During the four weeks of lessons, the following multimodal approaches were utilized: numerous video clips from Youtube.com, dramatic reading activities, music videos (such as Dire Strait's song "Romeo and Juliet"), Baz Luhrmann's "Romeo and Juliet" film, artistic interpretations, a love letter, and finally a digital video of students acting out a scene. At the end of the "Romeo and Juliet" curriculum, the same questionnaire was administered to measure the students' attitudes, along with the open-ended questions.

*E. Findings*

An attitude scale questionnaire was administered before and after the Shakespeare unit to assess the students' attitudes towards learning Shakespeare in an English language class and to find out whether there had been any changes in their attitudes. A paired sample t-test was carried out to determine if there was a significant mean difference in pretest-posttest scores. The following hypotheses were tested:

$H_0$: There will be no significant mean difference in students' attitudes toward Shakespeare after the four-week multimodal intervention.

$H_1$: There will be a significant mean difference in students' attitudes toward Shakespeare after the four-week multimodal intervention.

The paired sample t-test indicated that there was a significant mean difference in the students' attitudes. Using a sample of n=24, the results showed that there was a mean difference in the attitude survey scores after the four-week intervention ($M = -0.23$, $SD = .47$), $t_{(23)} = -2.33$, $p < .05$, 95% CI: $-.43 - -.03$. The null hypothesis is rejected.

Cohen's d of .6 indicates a medium difference in the attitude scores after the four-week intervention.

**2.6 Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

|  |  | M | N | SD | SEm |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pair 1 | Pretest | 4.08 | 24 | .37 | .08 |
|  | Posttest | 4.31 | 24 | .40 | .08 |

**2.7 Table 2: Results of Paired Samples T-Test**

|  | Paired Differences |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pair 1 |  |  |  | 95% Confidence Interval |  |  |  |  |
|  | M | SD | SEm | Lower | Upper | t | df | p |
| Pretest- Posttest | -0.23 | 0.47 | 0.10 | -0.43 | -0.03 | -2.33 | 23 | 0.03 |

The findings of this study indicate a significant difference in students' attitudes toward reading Shakespeare in English language class by using a multimodal teaching approach. In addition to the pre and post survey, a questionnaire with open-ended questions was conducted with the students at the end of the "Romeo and Juliet" unit. The interview questions were about the students' likes and dislikes of the unit, if the Shakespeare unit changed the way they think about reading a play by Shakespeare, and if it improved their English skills. One student reported that the "Romeo and Juliet" unit made him realize that "it is cultural history and everyone should read it." Another student said that before reading the play he thought "Shakespeare plays were boring- and now I don't". One student expressed that by reading the play, his "language skills improved and my vocabulary is better than before reading the play". Finally, many of the students noted that their favorite activity was writing the love letter, "because it makes you feel like the main character."

### III. CONCLUSION

Plays by William Shakespeare are valuable and an authentic genre of literature that can be taught successfully in an ESL/EFL classroom. Reading Shakespeare can enrich language learning and promote creativity and motivation.  Traditionally, the plays of Shakespeare have been taught from a teacher-centered process; however, to better engage students, a learner-centered, multimodal approach should be used. A multimodal approach to teaching Shakespeare's plays helps develop an appreciation of reading drama as well as "students are motivated through their interactions with the text, the media used, the teacher, and the other students in the group" (Healy, 2010, p. 189). This study confirms the use of a multimodal approach to teaching Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" will improve students' attitudes toward reading the play in an English language classroom.

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**Biodata**

**Amy L. Freyn** holds a Doctorate in Leadership Education from Spalding University (Louisville, Kentucky, USA), a Master's in Teaching English from Bellarmine University (Louisville, Kentucky, USA), and a Bachelor's degree in English from Indiana University Southeast (New Albany, Indiana, USA). She is currently an Academic Coordinator and English professor at a private university in Quito, Ecuador. Dr. Amy Freyn has over 20 years of teaching experience in high schools and universities in the United States and Ecuador.

**Sandra Gross** holds a Master's in Development Studies from the London School of Economics and Political Science (London, England) and a Bachelor's degree in Honors Political Science from Wilfrid Laurier University (Waterloo, Canada). She is currently a candidate for a Doctorate in Higher Education Leadership from the University of Miami (Coral Gables, USA). She is Dean of Languages and an English professor at a private university in Quito, Ecuador.