

Reimagining the Bard in the Language Classroom: An Integrated Pedagogical Framework for Teaching Shakespearean Sonnets In ESL/EFL Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Sonnets by William Shakespeare are an integral part of English literature; however, because they contain advanced vocabulary and syntax, they are often ignored in English Language Teaching (ELT). This paper attempts to present a case for the incorporation of William Shakespeare's sonnets in an English as a Second Language/English as a Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) classroom, going beyond the traditional appreciation of these poems by English-literate students. William Shakespeare's sonnets are helpful in the progress of English students' linguistic, communicative, and intercultural skills. Research on Integrated Sonnet Pedagogy (ISP) will be presented, covering a range of teaching methods such as Swain's Output Hypothesis, Krashen's Input Hypothesis, Affective Filter Hypothesis, transactional theory of reading, and performance-based approaches. Mobile-assisted language learning will also be considered. The focus will be on developing vocabulary and skills related to intonation and pronunciation of poetry. Sonnets will be introduced in a way that reduces students' affective barriers.

Keywords: Shakespearean sonnets; ELT pedagogy; ESL/EFL literature teaching; performance pedagogy; digital literature learning; postcolonial pedagogy; undergraduate English learners

INTRODUCTION

Few bodies of literary work occupy as ambivalent a position in the English language classroom as Shakespeare's sonnets. On one hand, they are the most compact, self-contained, and formally elegant expression of Renaissance English available to a language teacher; fourteen lines are enough to house a complete argument, a volta, a resolution, and some of the most quoted lines in the English literary tradition. On the other hand, the very features that make the sonnets memorable to native or highly proficient readers — inverted syntax, archaic diction, condensed metaphor, and a metrical pattern unfamiliar to most learners' first languages — are precisely the features that make them appear inaccessible to learners for whom English is a second or foreign language. The consequence, in many undergraduate contexts, is that Shakespeare is quietly cordoned off into elective literature courses for English-major specialists, while the general English or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classroom, where the majority of undergraduates actually spend their language-learning hours, rarely encounters him at all.

This is a pedagogically unproductive separation. There has been a long and strong strand of ELT research that suggests that literary text (and poetry in particular) not only provides the language learner with authentic,

emotionally arresting and richly linguistic input that coursebook text simply cannot match, but it also has an intrinsic didactic value. Poems, in particular, have been called a natural and stimulating resource for language classrooms, not so much because they are "literature," but because of the features they have that can be used to develop vocabulary and pronunciation skills as well as to express oneself creatively. In principle, sonnets are short, formally patterned, and organized with a recurring structure of quatrains and a concluding couplet, lending themselves to this kind of literary pedagogy based on language instruction and targeting the language student — again, to the extent that the pedagogy itself comes from language classes and not literature classrooms.

The present paper responds to three gaps in the existing literature. First, most published work on teaching Shakespeare in the EFL classroom, including the influential edited volume by Eisenmann and Lütge, is grounded primarily in European secondary and tertiary contexts, leaving the specific challenges of outer-circle, multilingual undergraduate classrooms comparatively under-theorized. Second, scholarship on Shakespeare's place in Indian education has been dominated by historical and postcolonial literary criticism rather than by classroom-level ELT methodology, leaving a gap between the "why" of Shakespeare's contested presence in Indian curricula and the "how" of teaching him responsibly and effectively to L2 learners today. Third, the growing body of research on digital and multimodal tools for developing speaking and communicative competence has rarely been applied specifically to canonical poetic forms such as the sonnet, despite its evident potential for annotation, performance recording, and collaborative meaning-making.

This paper addresses these gaps by proposing the Integrated Sonnet Pedagogy (ISP) model, a four-stage conceptual framework that draws together language-acquisition theory, performance pedagogy, digital literacy scholarship, and postcolonial pedagogy into a single classroom-ready structure. The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews relevant literature on Shakespeare in the EFL classroom, Shakespeare's postcolonial and Indian reception, and digital tools in literature and speaking pedagogy. Section 3 outlines the theoretical framework underpinning the ISP model. Section 4 presents the model itself, stage by stage. Section 5 discusses pedagogical implications and classroom applications, with particular attention to non-literature undergraduate cohorts such as Computer Science learners enrolled in General English courses. Section 6 considers challenges and limitations, and Section 7 concludes with a proposed empirical agenda for future quasi-experimental validation.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Shakespeare in the EFL/ESL Classroom

The case for using literature, including poetry, in second-language classrooms rests on the argument that literary texts constitute authentic material that can revitalize an otherwise purely functional or transactional language-learning process, while also cultivating learners' communicative competence through active and creative engagement with language rather than passive comprehension alone. Within this broader tradition, Shakespeare occupies a special and complicated status. Eisenmann and Lütge's edited collection on Shakespeare in the EFL classroom brought together analytical, interactive, performative, and creative approaches to teaching Shakespeare's comedies, tragedies, histories, and sonnets, arguing that the benefits of engaging with Shakespeare at the tertiary level are both primary, in terms of learners' language competence, and secondary, in terms of cultural and critical literacy. As Paran (2016) pointed out in his review of this volume for *ELT Journal*, its applicability, in terms of the significance it bears, goes beyond Shakespeare alone, as it poses theoretical and practical questions emerging from the use of any literary text data in the language classroom.

Of particular relevance to the present paper is the fact that, within that same volume, the chapter by Volkmann (2014) focuses on the process of developing symbolic competence through Shakespeare's sonnets, rather than the sonnets as set pieces of literature to be explicated, but as a tool to build symbolic competence – which is relevant to the learners' capacity to read, produce and manipulate the symbolic language they are dealing with, a capacity directly relevant to communicative competence in the second language (L2). This reframing, from

sonnets-as-literary-artefact to sonnets-as-language-resource, is central to the pedagogical model proposed in this paper.

Complementary practitioner-oriented scholarship has converged on a broadly similar set of classroom strategies: chunking a sonnet into manageable units such as individual quatrains, providing side-by-side modern paraphrases, using “translation” aids sparingly rather than as a substitute for engagement with the original language, and pairing textual analysis with performance. Creative-writing approaches, in which learners compose their own short poems using Shakespearean form after studying a small set of sonnets, have also been proposed as a means of building familiarity with both the language and the structural conventions of the sonnet in a manner that is engaging rather than intimidating. These strategies collectively suggest that the central pedagogical challenge is not whether the sonnets can be taught to L2 learners, but how the difficulty of the language can be scaffolded without diluting the text into irrelevance.

Postcolonial and Indian Engagements with Shakespeare

For undergraduate classrooms in India and other formerly colonized outer-circle English contexts, teaching Shakespeare cannot be treated as pedagogically neutral. Shakespeare's institutional presence in Indian education has colonial origins: English literary study, with Shakespeare at its centre, was consolidated in Indian colleges from the early nineteenth century onward as part of a deliberate colonial education policy, most famously articulated in Macaulay's (1835) minute arguing for the diversion of resources toward English-language instruction on the grounds of its presumed civilizational value. By the 1920s, dozens of Indian universities were offering Shakespeare as part of undergraduate and postgraduate English programmes, and for much of the twentieth century, familiarity with Shakespeare functioned as a marker of social and academic prestige among the Indian English-educated elite.

Since the 1980s, however, Indian engagement with Shakespeare has shifted markedly from reverential cultural capital toward critical and postcolonial modes of reading, informed by scholarship on gender, race, and the politics of colonial education, of the kind associated with Loomba (1989), and by the broader postcolonial project of interrogating whose histories and values a canonical curriculum transmits. This critical turn has produced a rich body of literary-critical work but comparatively little guidance on how undergraduate language and literature instructors might translate that critical awareness into classroom practice for learners who are still developing basic proficiency and confidence in English. A pedagogy that simply retains Shakespeare's traditional canonical framing risks reproducing the very colonial hierarchy that postcolonial scholarship has worked to dismantle; a pedagogy that abandons Shakespeare altogether forfeits a text type that, as the sonnet-specific scholarship reviewed above suggests, retains genuine pedagogical value for language development. This is the postcolonial sonnet tradition itself, which has been subjected to retrofitting, familiarization, appropriation and even re-imagination by poets of all stripes working in English as an 'additional' or postcolonial language, rendering an historically 'aristocratic' genre accessible for the representation of mundane 'coloured' experience. This appropriative model, pedagogically extended, implies that Indian student-undergraduates can be placed in the role not only of recipients of the form of Shakespeare but also of potential appropriators; this is directly rooted in the fourth stage of the model, which is given below.

Digital and Multimodal Tools in Literature and Speaking Pedagogy

Another strand of research that has discussed the use of digital and multimodal tools in language learning has focused on the development of the learners' speaking skills and involvement with literary and/or cultural materials (Borden & Hughes, 2000; Wagner, 2006, 2011). Recent classroom-based research has explored IT-based instructional models for teaching poetry in university settings, employing multimedia annotation tools, interactive learning management systems, and collaborative online discussion forums to support learners' engagement with literary texts. Similarly, research on Web 2.0 tools in EFL contexts has linked digitally mediated, socially interactive learning environments to gains in learner self-efficacy and communicative engagement, while studies using clustered digital materials such as short videos and digital posters have reported improvements in undergraduate learners' speaking proficiency. More recent work specifically

addressing intercultural communication pedagogy has found that ICT tools including video-sharing platforms and synchronous communication technologies, can support the development of speaking competence and learners' strategies for negotiating meaning across cultural and linguistic differences (Hasyim et al., 2026).

Despite this substantial and growing evidence base, very little of this scholarship has been applied specifically to canonical poetic forms such as the sonnet, and almost none of it has been situated within the postcolonial Indian undergraduate context that forms the backdrop of the broader doctoral research from which this paper's framework emerges, namely the study of digital tools and English-speaking proficiency among undergraduate learners. This represents a clear and specific gap: digital tools have been shown to support speaking development in general, and Shakespeare has been shown to offer language-pedagogical value in principle, but the two strands have not yet been brought together into a coherent classroom model for outer-circle undergraduate learners. The Integrated Sonnet Pedagogy model proposed in Section 4 is an attempt to close that gap.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The ISP model draws on five complementary strands of theory. First, Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis suggests that language acquisition takes best place when the input is seen by the learner as slightly higher than the learner's current competence ($i+1$). If the lesson is carefully scaffolded, when combined with paraphrasing, glossing, and scaffolding in terms of structure, it can serve as just this type of input: linguistically challenging as it allows for growth, but at the same time pedagogically mediated and made understandable. Krashen's (1982) related Affective Filter Hypothesis is equally relevant, since anxiety, low motivation, or lack of confidence can block the processing of otherwise comprehensible input; this has direct implications for a text type, like Shakespeare, that learners often approach with pre-existing apprehension.

Second, Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of reading distinguishes between efferent reading, oriented toward extracting information, and aesthetic reading, oriented toward the lived experience of the text itself. Conventional literature instruction, particularly when Shakespeare is taught for examination purposes, tends to default to efferent reading practices such as line-by-line paraphrase and thematic summary. The ISP model instead treats the sonnet as an occasion for aesthetic, personally inflected transaction between reader and text, on the premise that this kind of engagement is both more motivating for language learners and more consistent with how the sonnets were originally intended to be encountered.

Third, Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis proposes that language acquisition is advanced not only by comprehensible input but by learners' efforts to produce comprehensible output, since the act of producing language pushes learners to notice gaps in their own competence and to test hypotheses about how the language works. This underpins the model's emphasis on performance and creative writing rather than reading and analysis alone.

Fourth, performance-based pedagogy treats dramatic and oral performance as central rather than peripheral to the study of Shakespeare, because the sonnets, like the plays, were composed for the ear as much as the eye. Reading a sonnet aloud, attending to its rhythm and stress pattern, engages learners' phonological awareness and oral fluency in ways that silent reading cannot, while also lowering the affective distance between learner and text by reframing the activity as performance rather than examination.

Finally, Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) scholarship, following Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008), contributes a framework for understanding how learners' everyday digital tools and practices, from smartphone annotation apps to messaging platforms already used for classroom communication in many Indian undergraduate settings, can be repurposed to extend classroom engagement with a text beyond the timetabled class period, supporting peer feedback, collaborative annotation, and recorded performance.

Taken together, these five strands converge on a single pedagogical premise: the sonnets are difficult not because they are inherently unsuited to language learners, but because conventional instruction typically asks

learners to process them as literary artefacts before they have had the opportunity to process them as language, as sound, or as personally meaningful text. The ISP model reverses that sequence.

The Integrated Sonnet Pedagogy (ISP) Model

The ISP model comprises four sequential stages, each addressing a different dimension of learner engagement while cumulatively building toward independent, confident, and contextually aware engagement with the sonnet form.

Stage 1: Scaffolded Close Reading. The first stage addresses the linguistic barrier directly rather than avoiding it. The sonnet is chunked into its constituent quatrains and concluding couplet, with each unit introduced separately rather than presented as a single intimidating block of text. Key vocabulary and archaic or unfamiliar structures are pre-taught before the reading begins. A side-by-side modern paraphrase is provided as a support, not a substitute, for the original text, and digital “translator” aids are used sparingly and only after learners have made a genuine first attempt at the original. A simple visual diagram of the sonnet's structure, showing its rhyme scheme, its division into quatrains and couplet, and the location of the volta, or turn in argument, gives learners a structural map before they are asked to navigate the language in detail. The explicit goal of this stage is to render the sonnet comprehensible input in Krashen's sense, without reducing it to a translation exercise.

Stage 2: Performative and Creative Engagement. Once learners have a working understanding of a sonnet's content and structure, the second stage shifts the emphasis from comprehension to production. Oral fluency, pronunciation, and prosodic awareness are engaged through choral and individual recitation, paired/in-group dramatized reading, and through simple performance tasks such as delivering a sonnet as if to a particular audience and in a particular way of speaking and feeling. A next step in the creative-writing strategies outlined in Section 2.1 then allows the learners to write their own short poems in a recognizable rhyme scheme, using a quatrain structure, closing couplet, and (of course) subject matter of their own choosing. In this phase, learners are encouraged to pay attention to and address gaps in their own vocabulary, syntactic structures, and rhythms through producing language within the discipline of a fixed poetic form, creating a low-stakes and creative situation.

Stage 3: Digital and Multimodal Extension. The third stage extends the classroom engagement into digital space, using tools that are already familiar to most undergraduate learners. Recorded audio or video performances of a sonnet, whether the original or the learner's own composition, can be shared and reviewed through a learning management system or a class messaging group, allowing for peer feedback on pronunciation and delivery. Collaborative online annotation, in which learners add glosses, questions, or personal responses to a shared digital copy of the text, extends the aesthetic, transactional reading encouraged in Stage 1 beyond the physical classroom. Where infrastructure allows, short multimedia projects, such as a class-produced video anthology of student-performed sonnets, provide an authentic, motivating endpoint for the unit and generate a durable artefact of learners' progress.

Stage 4: Postcolonial Contextualization. The final stage addresses the specific pedagogical burden identified in Section 2.2: that teaching Shakespeare in an Indian, or more broadly postcolonial, undergraduate classroom involves navigating not only a difficult literary language but a historically freighted curricular inheritance. Rather than either ignoring this history or allowing it to overshadow the language-learning objectives of the unit, the ISP model builds in explicit, age-appropriate discussion of how Shakespeare entered Indian education and why his sonnets, alongside those of postcolonial and diasporic poets writing in English, can be read as a form that Indian learners are equally entitled to inhabit, adapt, and rewrite rather than only inherit. This stage can be paired productively with brief comparative reading of Indian or diasporic poets working within or against the sonnet tradition, reinforcing the message, consistent with postcolonial sonnet scholarship, that formal inheritance from a colonial literary tradition does not preclude creative ownership.

The five strands to the ISP model were chosen because they address various barriers found in the literature: linguistic inaccessibility (comprehensible input), passive or purely efferent reading (transactional theory),

limited productive use of the language (creative-writing pedagogy), the confinement of learning to the classroom (digital and multimodal learning) and the inheritance of the Shakespearean canon model (which is colonially based). Also looked at were concepts of a sociocultural framework, specifically Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development and the idea of scaffolding that grew out of that concept (Wood et al., 1976) – in conjunction, there is a graduated support in Stage 1 and peer feedback in Stage 3. Nevertheless, with the exception of the specific dimensions of a literary text that need to be supported, sociocultural theory is viewed here not as a foundational strand but as a general orientation used in the delivery of the model; the term however "scaffolded" is used in the broader pedagogical context for which it was coined. The model itself is part of a research study on the use and development of digital tools in the creation of speaking proficiency in undergraduate ESL students. In that project the present paper is a preliminary theoretical study: conceptual in nature with the intention to propose and justify Stages 2 and 3 of the project, which are stages of performance and digital based speaking, leaving the actual classroom evidence for the empirical study for the dissertation.

Pedagogical Implications and Classroom Applications

The ISP model is designed to be adaptable across a range of institutional contexts, but it has particular relevance for General English and ESP classrooms serving non-literature undergraduate cohorts, such as first-year Computer Science students enrolled in compulsory English courses, who would otherwise have little or no structured exposure to Shakespeare. The one sonnet module based on three or four sessions over the four ISP stages introduces and follows can be integrated, without the time demands of a typical literature elective, into an existing speaking-skills or communicative-English syllabus. Within such a module, assessment might allow for weighting for comprehension and understanding of the structure, for oral presentation and pronunciation, for creative and/or interpretive response, but not only for literary analysis. The 'stagedness' of the model facilitates differentiation for large, linguistically diverse undergraduate classes, typical of Indian tertiary English education and allows more time at stage 1 for those who need it, and more rapid progression for stronger learners to Independent Creative Writing.

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

The implementation of the ISP model has several challenges. Many ELT practitioners are trained in either language teaching and/or literary studies, and less than a small number are prepared in a way that combines the two – the successful implementation of this model therefore requires teacher development that involves confidence in using literary language both pedagogically and analytically. Finally, there may be a concern that digital tools which are not adequately supported by context or pedagogy are only a superficial use of technology and not an extension of the learning process; Stage 3 activities should be created with clear language learning goals in mind and not simply added as a novelty exercise. The postcolonial contextualization built into Stage 4 requires similar care: handled without sensitivity, critical discussion of Shakespeare's colonial history could alienate learners or overshadow their engagement with the text itself, whereas handled well, it can deepen rather than undermine their motivation to engage with the sonnets. Finally, infrastructural constraints, including inconsistent access to devices, connectivity, or recording equipment, mean that Stage 3 activities may need to be adapted or scaled back in under-resourced institutional settings.

CONCLUSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper has argued that Shakespearean sonnets, far from being pedagogically unsuited to ESL/EFL learners, represent an underused resource for developing linguistic, communicative, and intercultural competence, provided that classroom practice is redesigned around language-learning rather than purely literary-analytical objectives. The Integrated Sonnet Pedagogy model proposed here offers a structured, four-stage pathway, moving from scaffolded comprehension through performative and creative production to digital extension and postcolonial contextualization, that is intended to be adaptable to a range of undergraduate contexts, with particular relevance to outer-circle English settings such as India. This paper is a conceptual and theoretical one and, as such, does not report empirical outcomes - this is not an oversight but on purpose: the presented framework is offered as the groundwork for the following programme of classroom-based research. The next

logical step in line with quasi-experimental designs that have been proven in the wider literature on the uses of digital tools and speaking skills, would be to use the ISP model with an intact class of university students, where one course was taught literature-learning model fashion, and another course was instructed the same sonnets using the ISP model. Standardized oral fluency and pronunciation tests, a foreign language speaking anxiety/willingness to communicate test, and a literary comprehension test for content and form of the sonnets could be used for pretest and posttest measures. This type of design has an inherent potential for construct validity problems. Differences in outcome, if any, between the two sections may be due to the quality of the instructors or the methods they use to teach, and thus are not necessarily due to the pedagogy itself. When possible these should be taught by the same instructor to control this. The pre-specified lesson plans of equal contact time would be followed by both sections, and scores for oral performances would be awarded by independent raters who would be unaware of condition. If more than one instructor can not be used, the instructors should be similar in their qualifications and experience and the differences between the instructors noted as a limitation in interpreting the results. The pre-test scores would also be used as a covariate to control for the pre-existing differences among the intact portions. These protections would enable such a study to test the pedagogical claims advanced conceptually in this paper and to provide much needed "evidence" for the classroom to a literature which has largely remained rather theoretical or descriptive in its approach to the place of Shakespeare in the second-language classroom.

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