Understanding Shakespeare's Language

by Francis Gilbert, author of *Starcrossed: Romeo and Juliet For Teenagers*.

This resource, part of the 'Shakespeare series' of email newsletters and following on from 'Introducing your students to Shakespeare' [Teachit filename 21854] and 'Shakespeare as part of the 'cultural capital'' [Teachit filename 22139] is designed to help students engage with Shakespeare's language through modern translation.

The basic idea

One of the best ways to get students to engage with Shakespeare's language is to 'translate' it into the modern idiom – put it into language which they find easy to understand.

Applying it

In order to get this right you need to do a few things before asking students to translate. First, students need a good idea of the overall plot of the play; this could be conveyed to them by way of a decent plot summary, many of which can be found for free on the internet. Second, students need to understand the personalities of the characters and the settings of the play. Once again, this could be done by giving them a series of character profiles and an outline of the setting, or alternatively you could show a filmed version of the play if there is one.

Once they've secured the basics of plot, characterisation and settings, you're ready to give them a section of the text to translate. Start small first of all. Choose a speech and explain the situation of the speech to them if they're not clear about what is going on: when, why and where it happens in the play and so forth. You will also need to provide explanations of the really difficult phrases – any good educational edition of Shakespeare will do this. Then ask them to work in pairs: they should read the speech through carefully, annotating it, picking out phrases that can be translated, and phrases that they don't understand. The linguist and author David Crystal has written very eloquently about the need for Shakespeare to be translated: many articles about Shakespeare can found on his website (http://www.davidcrystal.com) and his website *Shakespeare's Words* (http://www.shakespeareswords.com/) contains an excellent section where it points out the commonly used words in Shakespeare, arguing that Shakespeare should be treated as a foreign language with students needing to know the words here: http://www.shakespeareswords.com/FEW.

What's the point?

Shakespeare wrote his plays five hundred years ago in what is technically termed 'Early Modern English': many of the words he used may sound familiar but actually had different meanings back then. For example, a common verb like 'owe' actually meant 'own, possess, have' in his day (for more on Shakespeare's 'false friends' read Crystal:

http://www.davidcrystal.com/?id=4247&fromsearch=true). This means that he actually needs to be translated to be fully understood. The task is intellectually demanding because it requires students not only to translate but also consider the different contexts.

Tricks of the trade

The secret to a good translation is to make it sound natural: an extremely difficult thing to do. After a rough draft of the modern translation, you should ask students to consider updating the setting, the characters and the plot and 're-translating' their rough translation into this modern setting. This may mean that they stray quite a bit from the text. Allow them this latitude if they've done a good literal translation where they've looked closely at the original.

If you know your class definitely won't cope with translating whole chunks of Shakespeare, then get them to update the plot, characters and setting into the modern day, asking them to write a modern version of either the whole play or a particular section that seems to grab them. For example, when I did 'As You Like It' with a difficult Year 9 class, I gave some students the task of re-telling the story of the warring, jealous brothers Orlando and Oliver, while others focused upon Rosalind pretending to be a man.

You can differentiate the work easily by giving Gifted and Talented students more difficult passages or scenes, and less able students simpler sections of the text. For students who are struggling, printing out a 'No Fear Shakespeare' version of the text can help: http://nfs.sparknotes.com/. These are modern versions of the play but they are very literal and clunky; they will need to be 're-translated' again.

After students have redrafted their work, ask them to get their translations ready to perform to the class. You and the class can critique these!

Variations on a theme

Get students to work in groups on performing a version of their script, bringing in costumes and learning the lines they have written. This really brings the play alive.

Set up a debate about whether modernising Shakespeare is a good or bad thing entitled: *Modernising Shakespeare: sacrilege or saviour?* My article about how I was attacked in *The Daily Telegraph* for modernising Shakespeare could be a good place to start with sparking off a debate: http://www.localschoolsnetwork.org.uk/2011/04/toby-young-savages-the-creative-teaching-techniques-that-enable-teachers-like-me-to-get-great-results/.

Putting pen to paper

The great advantage of translating Shakespeare is that it does get students to write often significant amounts based on Shakespeare. If they are struggling, you may need to scaffold by showing them your own attempts or writing along with them in the class. Don't be afraid to voice your worries, fears and difficulties over it. When I wrote, Starcrossed, my teenage version of *Romeo and Juliet* I found it helpful to get my students' feedback.

Writing to analyse, review and comment:

Get your students to write an analytical essay after they've done their translation about how and why they translated Shakespeare in the way they did, evaluating its success. The title could be 'Translating Shakespeare'.

Writing to inform, explain and describe:

Get students to write an informative leaflet about how to translate Shakespeare, offering their own texts.

Writing to persuade, argue and advise:

They could write up their debate in the form of a persuasive speech entitled, *Modernising Shakespeare: sacrilege or saviour?*

Whizzing it

Get your students to write 'teenage versions' of Shakespeare and publish them as e-Books.

If your students are artistically minded, get them to do a comic version of a scene. This website has more information about comic book versions of Shakespeare: http://www.shakespearecomics.com/

Get your students to film their scene. I've done this and it's worked well with students who are studying media as well.