

The Hamlet Project. Bringing Shakespeare's Masterpiece Closer to EFL Students Today

Agnes Krisztina Andras

Tamási Áron High School, Odorheiu Secuiesc

Abstract

This paper presents the Hamlet Project, conducted during the 2024–2025 school year with a class of 28 tenth-grade students (aged 16) by two English teachers. The main idea behind the project was bringing modern day teenagers close to a world which they basically consider too far and too old-fashioned for them to be curious about. The project was aimed to create a real connection between teenagers and the world of the famous Shakespearean masterpiece, Hamlet. This paper presents the phases of the project, the methods used during the project, the results as well as the conclusions of the project.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Hamlet, teenagers, project, classic, postmodern, values

Introduction

Though written centuries ago, Hamlet has not ceased to be one of the most often performed Shakespearean dramas plays even in our modern digitally overwhelmed times in theatres all over the world.

The project was designed by the two English teachers of a bilingual philology class . This class learns English in two separate groups of 14 - 14 students with approximately similar level of English (B2-C1) in 5 hours/ week. Along with the teaching of General English (reading, writing, use of English, vocabulary and speaking practice) the teachers dedicated one class per week to this culture- literature- centered project, which we simply referred to as the Hamlet project. It started in November and it ended by the end of next March.

The topic of the project presented in this paper is Hamlet, by William Shakespeare, a literary work that has been dealt with in countless ways and still offers aspects to analyse for modern day readers, viewers, interpreters, etc. The secondary topic of our project was the way in which

today's teenagers relate to such a classic masterpiece which is centuries older than the 16- year-olds who were the subjects of this project.

The aim of the project was to introduce students to the world of English Renaissance Literature, to the literary heritage of William Shakespeare through one of the most well known and still controversial tragedies written by the great playwright: Hamlet.

Beyond this general objective, we were also interested in whether the topic would remain merely a lesson to be memorized—focused on the author's biography, the characteristics of the genre, and various critical interpretations of the play—or whether, through the project, students would be able to form a genuine connection to the work. We aimed to see if they could relate the characters and conflicts to their own lives and recognize what a classical masterpiece represents: its ability to convey meaningful messages to later generations, regardless of how distant in time they may be from the moment it was written.

The two teachers of the two groups worked separately with their students most weeks, but they carried out similar activities during the project classes and by continuous consulting kept track of each other's progress. Every month the two groups had a class where the two groups worked together, thus having the chance to exchange ideas, to find out about the other group's achievement which also served as a motivating factor for the members of different groups to keep their enthusiasm.

In the form of re-grouping them mixing members of the two main groups we let them teach each other and share the acquired knowledge with one another. We also organized debate sessions in which controversial characters and conflicts were placed at the center of discussion, allowing different viewpoints to be contrasted. These debates highlighted that, despite the vast amount already written about the play, many questions still remain unresolved.

The project combined classroom-based activities—such as reading tasks, discussions, dramatizations, internet-based research, and film viewings—with experiences outside the classroom. These included a visit to a photo exhibition organized by the local Culture Center and a field trip to another city, where students attended a modern production of *Hamlet* directed by a contemporary director and performed by professional actors.

Planning the project required several hours of collaboration between the two teachers, as well as individual research. This process involved selecting reference materials, preparing worksheets and other classroom resources, designing tests and assessment tools to monitor progress, organizing the field trip, and choosing the audio and video materials to be used throughout the project.

Hypotheses

The project was built around three hypotheses: one addressing the universal themes of the play, another focusing on issues related to adolescence, and a third exploring the values found both in classical works and in postmodern life

The first hypothesis behind the project was that even though the play *Hamlet* was written hundreds of years ago, the problems presented in it are universal and timeless, so they still have relevance for 21st century teenagers. Topics like revenge, appearance vs. reality, corruption, the nature of death, and the complexities of action and inaction, themes of family, identity, politics, religion, and misogyny, the concept of madness, both feigned and real are all problems of the contemporary society and the literary text offers opportunity to deal with these topics through the lens of the play and in a broader perspective. By means of the project students were supposed to be discussing these subject matters in order to become familiar with possible solutions to these problems either offered by *Hamlet* itself or by the debates and reflections on the conflicts and themes within the play

There is a second hypothesis too. This highlights the fact that *Hamlet* can be viewed as a youth-centered drama, providing starting points for discussions about problems and conflicts typical of young people, much like the subjects of the project. *Hamlet* is often seen as a powerful representation of teenage problems and struggles, particularly those of a young man grappling with grief, betrayal, and identity. The play's exploration of themes like revenge, deception, and the complexities of family relationships resonates with adolescent experiences, making *Hamlet* a relatable character for many young people. There are seven clearly identifiable teenage concerns that could be dealt with during the exploration of *Hamlet*:

1. Grief and Loss: *Hamlet's* father's death and his mother's hasty marriage to his uncle trigger a deep sense of loss and grief. Teenagers today also experience grief and loss, whether from

the death of a loved one, a breakup, or other significant life changes. Hamlet's struggles with processing his emotions and his inability to move on resonate with teenagers who may be dealing with similar feelings.

2. Identity and Self-Doubt: Hamlet is constantly questioning his own identity and purpose, particularly in the face of his father's death and his mother's actions. This resonates with teenagers who are also trying to figure out who they are and what they want in life.

3. Rebellion and Authority: Hamlet's rebellious nature is evident in his interactions with his mother, uncle, and other authority figures. This rebellion is a common theme in teenage years, as young people often challenge society's norms and expectations.

4. Deception and Betrayal: The play is filled with deception and betrayal, from Claudius's murder of Hamlet's father to Ophelia's manipulation by her father. Teenagers can relate to the feeling of being betrayed by those they trust or being deceived by others.

5. Mental Health: Hamlet's mental state is often debated, with some interpreting his "madness" as a genuine mental health condition like clinical depression or bipolar disorder. This raises awareness about mental health issues that many teenagers face, such as depression, anxiety, and mood swings.

6. Existential Questions: Hamlet grapples with profound questions about life, death, and the meaning of existence. These questions are often explored by teenagers as they begin to think more deeply about their place in the world.

7. Social Isolation: Hamlet's isolation from his peers and his inability to connect with others on a meaningful level can be seen as a reflection of the social isolation that some teenagers experience mainly as a result of their digital escape patterns.

It was also a hypothesis of this project that classical values are still relevant for the postmodern era. While *Hamlet* is a product of Renaissance drama, it resonates with postmodern themes of uncertainty, subjectivity, and the questioning of grand narratives. Shakespeare's play, through Hamlet's character, explores themes of individual identity, morality, and the complexities of action that align with postmodern thought.

Methods and Activities

Getting familiar with Shakespeare's life data was part of the introductory lessons of the project. Students were given written facts about William Shakespeare's life and they worked in groups telling each other what their piece of information was. They were given a worksheet created

by the teacher and according to what they learnt from one another they needed to fill in the worksheet. After comparing the answers they had the chance to discuss about the age when the writer lived. The life data were taken from the Introduction of an abridged version of a Hamlet. (Jenny Dooley, Hamlet by William Shakespeare, Retold, Express Publishing 2004).

The next step in getting closer to Shakespeare's world was creating a general picture of what kind of works he created. Students had the chance to learn about the genres of the sonnet, the comedy and the tragedy. Working in groups, students collected characteristics of different genres from a set of information cards. In three smaller groups, they then created posters for each genre, defining its main features and providing famous examples from Shakespeare's works. Finally, they presented their posters to the other groups. These posters were later used in the project as reference materials.

As Hamlet is a tragedy, students had the opportunity to learn more about this genre by reading about the plots of several Shakespearean tragedies. They read famous quotations, and they worked in groups on three and four on a given title gathering information from the Internet to fill in the worksheets given by the teacher. In the same class they overviewed the general plot of Hamlet with the help of a video summary (<https://youtu.be/t0CqUTmwKiM>)

Before actually reading the text students had the opportunity to become familiar with the characters of the play by picking cards with the descriptions of the characters, they presented their card to the others, they listened to different utterances of the characters and they identified who that person was, they discussed the different characters and how each was connected to Hamlet within the network of relationships.

There were five classes entirely devoted to reading the text of the drama. The basic source of text consisted of Jenny Dooley, Hamlet by William Shakespeare, Retold, Express Publishing 2004 but sometimes the original text was also used as well as translation versions of the drama in Hungarian which is the mother tongue of the students involved in the project. Reading the text was either done by the teacher or by students; they did role-play reading, silent reading, homework reading and it was always followed by deep analysis of what they understood. Students learnt their favorite lines; they performed short dramatizations and invented other ways in which the plot could have developed during these text- centered classes.

Every fourth week during the project students had a shared class with the two groups and the two teachers together. In these classes students had the chance to share their knowledge gained throughout the Hamlet- based separate lessons and some more general topics were discussed like the context of Hamlet (Based on the video Shakespeare in context, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBghzlGjrS4&authuser=0> student found answer to questions like: What sources did Shakespeare use for writing Hamlet? What makes Hamlet characteristic to the Renaissance period? Justify why Hamlet is a humanist figure. Give examples of characters from the play who represent medieval thinking. Who created the Renaissance revenge tragedy? What are the typical features of a revenge tragedy? What is the difference in interpretation of the presence of a ghost between Catholics and protestants? What is the general role of women in the Renaissance tragedy? What categories do the characters in Hamlet fall into? What is the reason why everybody must die in the tragedy? Draw the hierarchy of cast characteristic to Renaissance plays!), the famous soliloquies of the main hero (using the activities from the resource Activity Booklet Shakespeare lives, 2016, British Council, GB as well as videos <https://youtu.be/xYZHb2xo0OI> and <https://youtu.be/HZKdfOaWaiM?si=4mYWxf2HhlCReMhR>), the role of jesters in dramas (based on the video <https://youtu.be/m7F5ioUQLJc> students answered questions about the information contained in the video), famous quotations from Shakespeare which people generally do not even know they belonged to William Shakespeare.

During the project several versions of film and theatrical performances as well as the animated version of Hamlet were shown to the students either as illustrations or as demonstrations of how many different ways of interpretations are available to such a complex drama as Hamlet. The project included a field trip to Cluj Napoca where students visited the Hungarian National Theatre's Hamlet performance directed by Gabor Tompa.

After the visit to Cluj Napoca students were given the opportunity to discuss in debate groups the questions that they had about the stage performance and interpretation of the tragedy.

The assessment of the project included short tests, cooperative group tasks, Kahoot quizzes, and Jeopardy-style revision games. The teachers aimed not to rely solely on grades, but rather to encourage students to engage genuinely with the world of drama, instead of seeing it only as a school assignment that affected their final average.

One particularly original, yet popular, form of assessment was a field trip to a photo exhibition entitled *Animals in Nature* at the local Culture Center. Each student brought a memorized

quotation from *Hamlet* and had to find a photograph that they felt related to their chosen line. They then recited their quotation, and their peers were challenged to discover the connection between Shakespeare's words and the selected image.

The most valuable insight for the teachers was that the students did not perceive this as an obligatory task; instead, they experienced the joy of engaging with art in a meaningful way.

Results

As a result of this project, students gained a general understanding of the English Renaissance, the world of the renowned playwright William Shakespeare, and an in-depth knowledge of *Hamlet*, the tragedy. This provided students with the opportunity to observe how a classical work written in the early 17th century can still convey a meaningful message to teenagers in the 21st century. It was not merely a challenging text for them to navigate, but it also proved to be a vibrant and impactful story. They could connect with its complex characters, whose conflicts and struggles remain relatable and relevant to modern readers.

This project offered students possibilities to express their opinions, to debate with one another, to learn to find arguments in order to prove their points, they also could see how several interpretations of the same words can live together thus understanding themselves and the world surrounding them on a deeper level and in a more open way.

Throughout the project student met different media, both paper- based and electronic, videos containing factual information, artistic interpretation, visually or audio materials which helped all learner-types to approach the topic in their own best ways. As a result none of the students felt excluded or lost in the process of the journey into Hamlet's world.

The result of the different forms of assessment showed that there was a growing interest towards the topic during the project which was also proven by the fact that nobody chose miss the field trip though it was not compulsory, but extra/school activity the expenses of which students had to cover themselves.

All the three hypotheses the project was based on were met by it, as it was obvious that the topics and conflicts of the play could be understood by the modern day readers, it was also proven that teenagers can relate to problems and dilemmas of the characters and not losing interest and enjoying the analysis of the play from several points of view through a five-months-

long project justifies the third hypothesis too, referring to the fact that classical values can still be appreciated by today's postmodern teenagers.

Conclusion

As a conclusion of the project it can be stated that it involved serious planning, perseverance, creativity, flexibility and long hours of preparation for the two teachers as well as hard work and good co-operation skills from the part of the students, but it was worthwhile as the process itself was enjoyable for both students and teachers and the outcome of the project justified the hypotheses of the teachers.

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Video resources

<https://youtu.be/t0CqUTmwKiM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBghzlGjrS4&authuser=0>

<https://youtu.be/xYZHb2xo0OI>

<https://youtu.be/HZKdfOaWAiM?si=4mYWxf2HhLCReMhR>

https://youtu.be/tsPPI_7x1dk

<https://youtu.be/BmjFgYdvcGI?si=v7JPJyqwksnCSgY>

<https://youtu.be/lT0eACdbASQ?si=YG1EpD54cWvjR5DM>

<https://youtu.be/OtNMjZoZNbM>