

Making Dramatic Literature More Accessible and Relevant to High School Students

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Abstract

I conducted a self-study to examine how teachers can make dramatic literature more accessible and relevant to students of different backgrounds in a high school English classroom. *Dramatic literature* in this case can be defined as literary works written with the intent to be performed on the stage and shares the following defining characteristics: acts, scenes, stage directions, dialogue, and a cast of characters. Starting in September of 2022, I began collecting data with field notes, anecdotal records, informal surveys, lesson plans, and student work samples. The lesson plans outlined learning objectives, common core state standards, instructional procedures, student accommodations, assessments, and materials. These helped me discern which modes of content delivery were being utilized in the classroom. The student anecdotes, field notes, and informal survey contained notes on student responses to instruction. These helped me identify which modes of content delivery were more or less effective in aiding students comprehend the chosen dramatic text. The student work samples evaluated the learning progress of students. These samples helped me determine the successes, failures, and modifications needed to be made in my teaching. As an aspiring teacher, it is important for me to make sure that my students are given every opportunity to connect with and develop an understanding of chosen texts within the curriculum. Dramatic texts are complex and teachers must understand what modes of content delivery are available in order to help students enjoy, appreciate, and comprehend what they are reading.

Keywords: multimodal theory, differentiated instruction, Shakespeare, dramatic literature

Introduction

It is no secret that students dread reading plays like *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *Twelve Angry Men* because of the level of rigor attributed to them. But, dramatic literature is an integral part of the English Language Arts curriculum as another style of writing and form of storytelling to be analyzed and interpreted. Gorlewski and Shoemaker (2013) proposed that if teachers provided students with multiple ways to approach dramatic literature, they would have more opportunities to comprehend the complex language found in dramatic works and develop an appreciation for playwrights like Shakespeare. Essentially, when teachers differentiate the process of delivering new information, they make dramatic literature much more accessible and relevant to students.

From a social justice perspective, multimodal teaching is imperative in engaging all students in the learning process. Porter (2009) compiled several research articles, case studies, and reports to show that relying on one means of representation subjects English language learners (ELLs) and non-standard English speakers to low-level curricula that promote surface level comprehension. While Porter (2009) did not factor in race and socio-economic class into her study, these two aspects of a students' identity can certainly affect the way in which they respond to different approaches to instruction and may lead to a gap in understanding if teachers do not differentiate their delivery of new information.

While my student teaching experience took place at a school where a majority of the student population identified as White and middle- to upper-class, it is likely that my permanent place of employment as an in-service teacher will be more diverse. My job as a teacher is to meet the needs of my students. Other research studies have shown that appealing to the different types of learners within the classroom community is one way to deepen connections between students and teachers as well as students and the texts they are reading. Therefore, I focused my research on how teachers can implement multiple modes of content delivery in instruction to aid students in comprehending and connecting with dramatic literature. In this research paper, I discuss the methods I used, reviewed relevant literature on this topic, my data collection and analysis, and my concluding recommendations for teachers and other researchers.

Methodology

In an effort to give students every opportunity to connect with and develop an understanding of dramatic literature, I conducted a self-study in a high school classroom during my student teaching experience. My study is designed to develop and implement ways to incorporate a *multimodal teaching* approach in a curriculum revolving around William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. In this study, I investigated the question: *How can I make dramatic literature more accessible and relevant to students of different backgrounds?*

I refer to *dramatic literature* as a literary work written with the intent to be performed on stage and shares the following defining characteristics: acts, scenes, stage directions, dialogue, and a cast of characters. Thus, plays fall into this genre of writing whereas novels, graphic novels, and poetry anthologies do not.

I had 16 students participate in my study from a standard English II class with the majority in ninth and tenth grade. All students attended the same school located in a rural town in central Illinois. The class size was fairly large at 28 students, one of whom had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). All students had access to school issued computers and the Instructional Materials Center (IMC), and most had encountered dramatic literature in their English I class the previous year.

I collected *field notes, anecdotal records, informal surveys, lesson plans, and student work samples as main qualitative data sources*. I designed *lesson plans* prior to my university supervisor's site visits. These *lesson plans* outlined learning objectives, common core state standards, instructional procedures, student accommodations, assessments, and materials. After I implemented these lesson plans, I recorded *student anecdotes* and wrote *field notes*. All three sources of data reflect on the increasing number of students that began to take on roles in dramatic performances of *The Tragedy of Macbeth* and contain student responses to modern film adaptations and fully dramatized audio narrations, which were the three modes of content delivery I implemented in keeping with a multimodal teaching approach. I gave an informal survey to students at the end of the unit to reflect upon the differing modes of content delivery and which, if any, promoted reading comprehension. Lastly, I collected *student work samples* over the semester as a major source of data. These work samples include body biographies, theme charts, guiding questions packets, Socratic discussion preparation sheets, quizzes, the final paper, and final paper revisions, all of which required students to think on what they gleaned from the text, audio narration, class performance, and film.

To draw conclusions from my self-study, I categorized my data by mode of content delivery and used Ryan and Bernard's (2003) techniques to analyze repetition, similarities and differences, and theory related materials within my *field notes, anecdotal records, responses to the informal survey, lesson plans, and student work samples*. My framework for analysis was dependent on Kress' (2010) theory of multimodality. Kress defines mode as "a socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning. *Image, writing, layout, music, gesture, speech, moving image, soundtrack and 3D objects* are examples of modes used in

representation and communication” (Kress, 2010, p. 79). To adopt a multimodal teaching approach, multiple modes of content delivery must be implemented in unit planning. I coded the data collected from my unit on *The Tragedy of Macbeth* and discovered which modes of content delivery were present: visual, kinesthetic, aural, verbal, and textual. These modes were then isolated and investigated further to determine whether or not they promoted reading comprehension. Results of this analysis are detailed in the coming sections.

Literature Review

Textual Content Delivery

Literature shows that while exclusively adopting textual modes of content delivery like close reading has its pitfalls, this method in combination with other reading strategies can positively influence students’ perception of dramatic literature. Brewer (2019) looked into how genre analysis paired with close reading effects student engagement in critical examinations of texts. In her review of the literature, she found that the common core state standards link close reading to high stakes assessment, which has resulted in many students struggling to develop connections to what they are reading. Through her analysis of other studies, Brewer (2019) developed a scaffolding strategy that tasks students with identifying patterns and features associated with different genres of literature to enrich their understanding of their own reading process. This reflective exercise was put into practice in Brewer’s (2019) college writing classrooms and student responses to this exercise revealed that it was successful in motivating and engaging students as readers. Brewer (2019) suggested that teachers adopt reader-centered practices, such as genre analysis, and move away from focusing only on formal elements of writing.

Similarly, the study presented by Fang and Pace (2013) demonstrated that adopting guided reading approaches across multiple readings of the texts support students in comprehension. Fang and Pace (2013) concentrated on addressing linguistic sources of complexity by offering five activities for teachers to incorporate in instruction. These activities included targeting discipline-specific vocabulary, identifying atypical grammatical metaphors, observing how a text coheres, developing an awareness of dense language structures, and considering grammatical intricacy. Through their research analysis, they concluded that these activities promote reading competency and support interpretation. They recommended that teachers examine texts with students rather than depend on a routine that centers around individual reading. Fang and Pace (2013) also advised that future research more thoroughly examine all of the issues stemming from the Common Core State Standards, as they were beyond the scope of their study.

In the same vein, Porter’s (2009) study determined that analyzing the words in Shakespeare’s plays is enriching for ELLs. The purpose of her study was to expose ELLs to high-level curriculum to provide them with experience with the English language. To conduct her research, Porter (2009) experimented with several reading strategies with her ELL 3 Reading and Writing Class. This class was composed of students ranging from grades 9-12 who were on

the brink of succeeding in a mainstream English Classroom. One strategy she found particularly successful was grouping students to work together to define unfamiliar words in Shakespeare's plays. To provide them with the tools to do so, Porter (2009) taught them how to analyze language using context clues and word parts as part of a pre-reading lesson. Additionally, Porter (2009) created archaic vocabulary cards with their modern equivalents and tone vocabulary cards with human emotions for the students to study while discussing important lines in Shakespeare's work. Student observation and analysis of literature in the field yielded that this mode of content delivery is meaningful and should be utilized in the ELL classroom because it motivates students to read difficult texts, helps students expand their knowledge, and builds vocabulary.

Verbal Content Delivery

Research has indicated that verbal content delivery, the involvement of spoken word to convey subject matter, improves reading comprehension and is a successful way of aiding students in interpreting language found in dramatic literature as a result. Lo, Lu, and Cheng's (2021) study investigated the impact Reader's Theater, dramatic readings, has on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' reading comprehension. To conduct their mixed methods research, Lo, Lu, and Cheng (2021) divided 51 students from two natural science classes into two groups. Twenty-five students were a part of the experimental group that received instruction through Reader's Theater. Twenty-six students were a part of the control group with normal instruction. Quantitative data was collected from two different questionnaires, a reading comprehension pretest and posttest, and a Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale. Qualitative data was collected from interviews with all 51 participants. Test scores yielded that Reader's Theater helped low achievers improve their word recognition by learning more words and intermediate learners improve their understanding of sentences and content by stressing their meaning, thus suggesting that this mode of content delivery positively affects English reading comprehension. Lo, Lu, and Cheng (2021) recommended that future researchers examining Reader's Theater collect more quantitative data samples, as that was one of their study's limitations, and analyze how visual modalities work in conversation with verbal modalities.

The study presented by Hill (2020) came to a similar conclusion that modes of verbal content delivery enable greater comprehension of dramatic texts. Specifically, she looked into how choral reading—reading texts aloud in unison—aids students in finding meaning in and connections to Shakespeare. Hill (2020) carried out her research by dividing her secondary English education students into groups of four or five. Each group was given a soliloquy from Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* to closely read and adapt as a choral reading. This process was modeled by Hill (2020) before students were set to perform. After each choral reading was presented to the class, the students were asked to individually reflect on their experiences. These reflections were collected and analyzed in conjunction with Hill's (2020) observational notes. The data ultimately revealed, via trends in student responses, that this mode of instruction advanced students' critical thinking skills, promoted reading fluency, and helped with decoding, implying that choral reading is successful in developing greater reading comprehension within high school students. Two limitations of Hill's (2020) study were time

and the amount of text read. Hill (2020) suggested that teachers implement choral readings for short durations of time and that students engage in this activity with key soliloquies. However, she did not compare her findings with data collected from choral readings implemented over longer periods of time or students engaging in this activity with whole scenes rather than passages, suggesting that future research be conducted with these factors in mind.

Young and Ortlieb (2018) also determined that verbal modes, like Reader's Theater, support adolescent readers struggling with reading fluency and comprehension. Young and Ortlieb (2018) focused on research-based strategies teachers can utilize to implement reader's theater in secondary classrooms. Using the theory of automatic processing in reading as their theoretical framework, Young and Ortlieb (2018) analyzed quantitative research as part of their review of the literature and cross-examined key qualitative findings to discern if there were any benefits to incorporating Reader's Theater in instruction. Through their research analysis they found that Reader's Theater's focus on recitation and close reading helped students with comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary. Young and Ortlieb (2018) recommended that teachers capitalize on the internet as a resource for Reader's Theater scripts to integrate in lesson planning and encourage students to transform their own texts into scripts. Nonetheless, this study does not address what advantages there are to student crafted Reader's Theater.

Kinesthetic Content Delivery

Three studies deduced that kinesthetic content delivery, the incorporation of movement to help students process information, positively influences comprehension. The study presented by Haughey (2012) focused on a performance-based approach to teaching Shakespeare. He criticized approaches that are dependent on memorization and recitation, asserting that they promote surface level understandings of the text and create negative perceptions of theater. Instead, he advocated for the incorporation of dramatics in curricula as a means of encouraging students to think critically. Citing other researchers, he further supported how this kinesthetic method of content delivery is integral in promoting student engagement with dramatic literature. Haughey (2012) ultimately determined through his research analysis that performance-based instruction on Shakespeare's works promoted engagement by activating the student imagination, giving students an avenue to express themselves, and making the material more pleasurable. He recommended that teachers embrace dramatic modes of content delivery in partnership with film and internet technologies in an effort to widen exposure to Shakespeare's canon. However, Haughey (2012) does not address how up and coming technologies should be utilized when such an approach is adopted.

Similar to Haughey (2012), Smith (2020) found that teaching methods rooted in performance benefit students academically and socially. Using performance pedagogy as her theoretical framework in conversation with her own background in Shakespearean theater, Smith (2020) breaks down dramatic-based approaches into two stages, (1) a close reading of the play and (2) a class production of that play, to discern how students respond to a kinesthetic mode of content delivery. Further, Smith (2020) analyzed data collected from middle and high school teachers in research carried out by the University of Warwick and found that 94% of teachers

agreed that a performance-based approach was helpful to students. Smith (2020) concluded that this mode of content delivery should be used in instruction because it aids students academically in language immersion, developing connections to historical moments, and memorizing more complicated information. These benefits are intertwined with the inherent social development that takes place across both stages of this method of teaching. Specifically, students learn how to become more empathetic, improve upon their decision-making skills, gain confidence, collaborate effectively, and express their emotions. Smith (2020) recognized that global epidemics like the COVID-19 pandemic serve as obstacles to performance-based learning. Even so, she urged teachers to create supportive virtual environments where students can design their own productions.

While Haughey (2012) and Smith (2020) end their research by stressing the importance of dramatics in the classroom as a kinesthetic mode of content delivery, Schupak (2018) found limitations to this method. Schupak (2018) used performance pedagogy as her theoretical framework and examined the myriad of performance-based approaches that are widely used and three issues that accompany them: time, insufficient student acting, and lack of teacher expertise. In analyzing literature defending such approaches, Schupak (2018) defined a spectrum. At one extreme lies productions of entire plays complete with memorization of lines, costumes, dress rehearsals, and an audience. At the other extreme are teachers who rely completely on the imagination to transform Shakespeare's texts. She determined that regardless of where the use of performance-based approaches fall on the spectrum, they are ultimately time consuming at the expense of literacy instruction and vulnerable to bad acting, which can result in poor comprehension. To overcome these problems, Schupak (2018) suggested that teachers alternate between performance modes like desk-based reader's theater and more traditional lectures to compensate for time constraints. She also advised that teachers undergo training to learn basic theatrical skills to prevent performances done badly and redirect students.

Aural Content Delivery

Research suggests that aural content delivery, the use of hearing to retain information, is beneficial to students tackling complex texts like dramatic works. Tusmagambet's (2020) study looked into the effects audiobooks have on the reading development of EFL students. Using *automaticity theory* and Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development to frame her experimental research, Tusmagambet (2020) divided 28 students from two ninth grade classrooms into two groups, a control group and an experimental group. Students in the control group silently read for a set amount of time without audiobooks and the experimental group silently read for a set amount of time with audiobooks. To measure reading speed, comprehension, and motivation, pretests, posttests, and questionnaires were administered to both groups. Each set of tests related to two texts from different books and consisted of 10 questions. Results from the reading speed and comprehension tests were evaluated to determine whether or not students found what they were reading to be meaningful. The Motivation for Reading Questionnaire was averaged across 53 items to measure motivation level. Tusmagambet (2020) found that the use of audiobooks positively affects the development of EFL students' reading

fluency, engagement, and reading comprehension. However, audiobooks do not increase student motivation. She recommended that future research examines larger sample sizes and investigate the effects of audiobooks with participants of different age groups.

Similarly, Wolfson's (2008) study demonstrated how audiobooks can be used as a mode of aural content delivery to improve the skills of adolescent readers. Such skills included "recalling details, understanding sequences, making predictions, drawing conclusions, making inferences, and retelling" in conjunction with reading fluency, word recognition, reading comprehension, motivation, and decoding (Wolfson, 2008, p. 105). Wolfson (2008) analyzed research conducted by two middle schools that incorporated audiobooks into their literacy program. Reading scores over the span of four years yielded that audiobooks improved fluency, expanded student vocabulary, and promoted reading comprehension, suggesting that this mode is an effective alternative to reading traditional texts. Wolfson (2008) suggested that teachers create a criteria for selecting audiobooks for their classroom based upon the book's quality, narration, and relevance in the classroom as well as its potential to motivate students to improve their reading. Further, they stressed the importance of reviewing literacy skills before, during, and after reading and listening to any narrative and informational text.

Like Tusmagambet (2020) and Wolfson (2008), Singh and Alexander (2022) highlighted the positive relationship between the co-presentation of audiobooks with print and comprehension performance. Using text-based learning approaches, information-processing theory as their theoretical framework, Singh and Alexander (2022) reviewed 32 documents covering elementary through university students who processed texts aurally through audiobooks and visually on paper and on screen to identify any existing patterns in reading comprehension. They determined that audiobooks are beneficial in facilitating reading comprehension for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) students because they increase exposure to spoken language. They also found that audiobooks support students who struggle with decoding printed texts and reading comprehension by facilitating their understanding of the subject matter and strengthening recall. Aside from those groups of students, Singh and Alexander (2022) concluded that audiobooks do little to support secondary students with no reading or learning concerns that encounter more complex texts, as they cannot be annotated like those in print. Singh and Alexander (2022) acknowledged that a limitation of their study was the lack of research comparing audiobooks to print mediums. Thus, they suggested that comprehension performance be examined in the future with similar depth to the growing body of work on print mediums versus digital mediums.

Visual Content Delivery

Literature shows that visual content delivery, the use of photos, videos, and media to display information, is an effective way of making dramatic literature more accessible and relevant to students. Gorlewski and Shoemaker's (2013) study examined five different approaches to teaching Shakespeare to discover which method increased student understanding and student interest in dramatic literature. These approaches included close reading, the use of parallel texts, the use of graphic novels, the use of film, and student performance. To conduct

their research, Gorlewski and Shoemaker (2013) provided background information on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to two English IV college preparatory classes. They then assigned a different approach to each act of the play. To assess student comprehension, tests were administered after each act. The tests were divided into two main sections, the first asking students to summarize major plot points and the second requiring that students analyze passages of dialogue "in terms of character, setting, and conflict" (Gorlewski & Shoemaker, 2013, p. 113). Additionally, students were tasked with reflecting on their learning and the different teaching approaches used through journal responses at the end of each act. Test scores yielded that student comprehension was the highest when the students viewed the film adaptation of the plays, the average percentage being 89%. The second highest test average, 82%, related to teaching Act III of *Hamlet* with a graphic novel (Gorlewski & Shoemaker, 2013). Both approaches are visual modes of content delivery, suggesting that students best understood and were most engaged by works of dramatic literature through a viewing experience. However, this study was not without its limitations. Gorlewski and Shoemaker (2013) acknowledged that time constraints were one such limitation imposed upon them and recommended that future studies explore similar methods of instructional delivery for a variety of plays rather than a singular play with multiple acts. They also suggested that data sources other than comprehension tests be collected and analyzed, as student performance varies under testing conditions.

The study presented by Sabeti (2014) similarly concluded that comic book adaptations of Shakespeare's works are effective in appealing and engaging a teenage audience. Using multimodal theory and adaptation studies as her theoretical frameworks, Sabeti (2014) compared and contrasted two comic book adaptations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that are aligned with school curricula to understand how readers connect with this visual mode of content delivery. The *Hamlet* adaptations analyzed include Self Made Hero's *Manga Shakespeare* series and SparkNotes' *No Fear Shakespeare* edition, both of which have different approaches to capturing Shakespeare's work. The former preserves Shakespeare's language, but shortens the original script, while the latter incorporates modern translations. To conduct her comparative research, Sabeti (2014) collected data from a series of interviews with the artists behind the adaptations to gain insight on the choices they made in conjunction with an exploration of the publishers' respective marketing strategies for the texts. She ultimately found that this mode of content delivery should be pursued in educational settings because more often than not, these adaptations are set in worlds that students can relate to as opposed to dramatic literature like Shakespeare's that is rooted in the past. In addition, they have been updated to fit new contexts and appeal to the current generation's preferred medium. Still, Sabeti (2014) suggests that future research should investigate further how comic book adaptations are received by students in the classroom and teachers who have preconceived notions on what constitutes Shakespeare in greater depth and with a variety of approaches.

Likewise, Wolfe and Kleijwegt's (2012) study determined that images aid students in interpreting complex texts like that of Shakespeare's dramatic works. They used visual thinking and multimodal theory to frame their study, which revolved around the close reading of a graphic

novel of *Othello* published by Can of Worms. Wolfe and Kleijwegt (2012) presented two pages of the graphic novel and examined how the artist used a visual mode of content delivery to give insight into Shakespeare's use of literary devices in his language. In engaging in this analysis, they introduced the concept of passive receivers (those who recognize artistic representations but do not discern their intent) and active receivers (those who recognize artistic representations and immerse themselves in critical thought) in relation to micro-semiotics (the layers of meaning in a text). Wolfe and Kleijwegt (2012) concluded that students who actively receive graphic novels by considering literary elements like composition, color, symbol, and focal point develop much deeper comprehension of complicated texts falling in the dramatic literature category than if they were to read the written text alone. They recommended that teachers model image interpretation to function as active receivers of visual imagery as opposed to passive receivers to expand textual comprehension. They also suggested that more research be conducted to learn about what processes students utilize when viewing visual texts.

Research and Data Analysis

As an aspiring English Language Arts teacher, it is of the utmost importance that students are given the necessary tools needed to establish connections with and develop an appreciation of dramatic literature. Many students find plays so difficult to read because they are not written to be read. Plays are written to be performed, heard, and seen. Merely reading the play does not allow students to fully realize the scope of dramatic literature, which is why I designed and implemented a multimodal unit (see Table 1) that goes beyond analyzing the language that is written on the page and engages *all* of the different learners in the classroom.

During my student teaching experience, I played fully dramatized audio narration while students followed along with the text with the aim of the voice actors making each character's voice more distinctive for my students and their volume, pitch, tone, stresses, and pauses promoting a better understanding of the text. I also exposed my students to film, which contributed to their understanding of space, scenery, and staging, all three of these elements being harder to picture when solely reading a dramatic text. Additionally, students were given opportunities to volunteer reading for character roles in Reader's Theater and dramatized performances to familiarize themselves with Shakespeare's language. Socratic discussions took place after each act of the play to analyze pivotal moments, major themes, character development and fill in any gaps in understanding. All four modes—textual, visual, aural, kinesthetic, verbal—were incorporated with the intention of providing the most clarity to students and promoting literary comprehension. Guiding questions packets, Socratic prep sheets, theme charts, body biographies, and the final paper were created to assess student learning throughout the duration of the unit.

Table 1

Multimodal Unit Plan Built Around Shakespeare's The Tragedy of Macbeth

Topic	Learning Objective	Mode	Assessment
1.1-2	To define and recognize the given circumstances and previous action in Shakespeare's <i>The Tragedy of Macbeth</i> .	Textual Visual Aural	Guided Notes Packet Guiding Questions Packet
1.1-2	To define and recognize how paradox is used in Shakespeare's <i>The Tragedy of Macbeth</i> .	Textual Visual Aural	Guiding Questions Packet
1.3-4	To define and recognize how foreshadowing, aside, and irony are used in Shakespeare's <i>The Tragedy of Macbeth</i> .	Textual Visual Aural	Guiding Questions Packet
1.5-6	To define and recognize how subtext is used in Shakespeare's <i>The Tragedy of Macbeth</i> .	Textual Visual Aural Verbal	Guiding Questions Packet
1.7	To define and recognize how soliloquies are used in Shakespeare's <i>The Tragedy of Macbeth</i> .	Textual Visual Aural Verbal	Guiding Questions Packet
1.1-5.8	To identify and analyze the development of major themes in Shakespeare's <i>The Tragedy of Macbeth</i> .	Textual Visual Aural Kinesthetic Verbal	Theme Chart
1.1-5.8	To recognize and analyze pivotal moments in Shakespeare's <i>The Tragedy of Macbeth</i> .	Textual Visual Aural Kinesthetic Verbal	Guiding Questions Packet
1.1-5.8	To analyze the development of major characters in Shakespeare's <i>The Tragedy of Macbeth</i> .	Textual Visual Kinesthetic	Body Biography Assignment
1.1-5.8	To engage in collaborative discussion surrounding Shakespeare's <i>The Tragedy of Macbeth</i> by drawing upon evidence from the text, putting forth ideas, posing questions, and responding to classmates.	Textual Aural Verbal	Socratic Prep Sheet Socratic Seminar

Facilitating Learning and Increased Understanding through Close Reading

During my student teaching experience I developed nine detailed lesson plans, six of which specifically related to close reading strategies and required textual modes of content delivery. These lesson plans outlined learning objectives, common core state standards, instructional procedures, student accommodations, assessments, and materials. Keeping record of each lesson plan helped me identify the close reading strategies that were utilized based on the common core state English Learning standards that my high school placement implemented in their standards-based grading system.

As referenced in Table 1, I assessed student learning by comparing the number of students who met the performance criteria of the guiding questions packet to the total number of students in my classroom. I distributed this packet at the beginning of the unit and contained questions specific to the play that directed students' attention to certain passages in an effort to aid them in analyzing and deepening their understanding of the text. Prior to independently working through their packets, I taught mini-lessons on key literary terms like *paradox*, *foreshadowing*, *aside*, *irony*, *subtext*, and *soliloquy*. I delivered these mini-lessons within the first 15 minutes of class and scheduled them before the students encountered such literary terms in the text. During this time, I provided definitions of each term and examples of general application before closely reading the text aloud with the students to point out examples of the term being used in *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. I encouraged students to continue identifying and analyzing figurative language within the play on their own to complete their guiding questions packet.

In accordance with standards-based grading, students who scored a zero *did not meet* the ELA learning standards, scored a one were considered *beginners*, scored a two were considered *progressing*, scored a three were considered *developing*, scored a four were considered *proficient*, and scored a five were considered *exceptional*. To meet the performance standards, students needed to receive a three or higher.

Of the sixteen participants that took part in my research, thirteen allowed me to make copies of their guiding questions packets. In the section pertaining to Act I scenes 1 and 2 of Shakespeare's play, 13 out of 13 students (100%) met the performance criteria. In the section pertaining to Act I scenes 3 and 4 of the play, 9 out of 13 students (70%) met the performance criteria. In the section pertaining to Act III scene 2, 10 out of 13 students (77%) met the performance criteria. In the section pertaining to act 3 scene 4, 10 out of 13 students (77%) met the performance criteria.

This standards-based grading data suggests that students benefited from a textual mode of content delivery at the outset of the unit. The high percentage scores at the beginning of the unit can be attributed to the fact that a majority of the mini-lessons were taught during our reading of the first act of the play. However, with the absence of mini-lessons later on in the unit, there was a brief period when students struggled to meet the performance criteria on their own before the percentage of mastery neared my target goal of 80% of students meeting or exceeding this standard. This result is consistent with Fang and Pace's (2013) study, which encouraged teachers

to examine texts with students in favor of individual reading. Thus, in order for this mode to be successful in promoting reading comprehension, it is important to consistently review key literary terms with the class as a whole throughout the duration of the unit rather than only exposing students to the definitions and application of terms the first time they appear.

Engaging in Reader's Theater and Influencing Students' Comprehension through Dramatized Performance

As part of my data collection, I wrote field notes every other day during the duration of the unit for a total of 20 notes. These notes related to student behaviors, personality traits, and role within the learning environment. Taking note of my observations helped me to get to know the students' learning styles better and keep track of how they responded to verbal and kinesthetic modes of content delivery. By comparing my notes on these two modes to the other modes I utilized, I can draw conclusions about how student comprehension was influenced by Reader's Theater and dramatized performances.

One emerging trend I found after reviewing my field notes was the increasing number of students that took on roles in dramatic performances of *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. At the beginning of the unit, I did not gravitate towards hosting Reader's Theaters or dramatized performances. I made this decision because many students expressed that they preferred listening to the audio narration of the text during our daily readings as a class because it was more time efficient, meaning that the recording kept a certain pace, and saved them the embarrassment of stumbling through Shakespeare's complex language. I had initially planned for the class to engage in Reader's Theater and dramatized performance only for the more challenging scenes, such as those within Act V, so that we could work to interpret the language as it was being read, but several outgoing students from theatrical backgrounds requested that we do it more often and, therefore, I included scenes, such as those within Acts III and IV, outside of the challenging ones. I was hesitant to move forward with the idea after gauging student reactions to the first day of Reader's Theater. I heard many groans, students vocalizing that what we were doing was a form of "torture" and could tell that many of the students were on edge as evidenced by the lack of eye contact when roles were being cast and the low volume level of the room. These reactions changed, however, after several weeks of continued performances.

I could tell that the students were becoming more comfortable making mistakes (such as mispronouncing words) in front of each other because they made efforts to sound them out rather than skip over them, a behavior they exhibited when they first began reading the play aloud. This observation supports Smith's (2020) finding that performance-based instruction helps students gain confidence as a result of language immersion. With time, some students began to display such confidence by varying their pitch, intonation, stress, and inflection where previously they read in a monotone voice. This comfortability with making mistakes and experimenting with voice not only creates opportunities for other students to be more comfortable with getting involved in class, but also makes the space more accessible for those who may have speech or language impairments.

I also saw an increase in student engagement in the form of voluntary performance participation and audience alertness. This is significant because a specific group of students that I monitored during the weeks we listened to the audio narration often kept their books closed, put their heads down, slept in class, and checked their cell phones. These behaviors appeared less frequently when dramatic performances were happening because the students needed to demonstrate active listening skills in the event that they were called upon to read for a role.

Additionally, students among those that I kept a close eye on confided in me that the performances put on by specific students were more entertaining than listening to the recordings, thereby aligning with Haughey's (2012) determination that this approach makes the material more pleasurable. Their remarks further indicated that this mode was successful in promoting student engagement with the material, because it allowed students to see their peers' investment in interpreting the text. This mode also made Shakespeare more accessible because watching their peers' performances was easier for the students to digest.

With Acts IV and V left, students transitioned from reading the text from their desks to reading from the front of the room. Many of the restless students paced back and forth across the room, matching the cadence of their voice to their footfalls. Others experimented with different gestures accompanying Shakespeare's text, two even swiping their hands up and down to match the sword fight that occurred in the final act of the play. For the most part, these movements captured and held the attention of the audience. However, it is important to note that there were times when student performers circled and cornered each other to purposely make their peers mess up their lines and get a laugh from the audience, thus disrupting the learning process. Yet, as a whole, the practice of Reader's Theater largely engaged students with material and their experimentation with voice and gestures as a means of interacting with the content allowed them to more easily comprehend the meaning of the text.

Representing Shakespeare Aurally and Visually

My field notes also revealed how representing Shakespeare's play aurally and visually affected student comprehension. As previously discussed, my class preferred listening to the audio narration of the text at the beginning of the unit. They demonstrated behavioral engagement with this mode of content delivery during our daily readings by moving their eyes back and forth as they processed each line and turning their pages succinctly as they followed along with the recording.

With time, I played the audio narrations less and less and instead encouraged my students to participate in reader's theater and dramatized performances because they began exhibiting behaviors that were not representative of active listening. After a couple days of getting used to the characters' volume, pitch, tone, stresses, and pauses in the recording, certain students drifted off to sleep in class and ignored my efforts to be present during instruction. Others figured they could just listen without following along in their physical books and spent time on their phones. When I approached these students and requested that they put their devices away, they almost always complied, yet took up a silent protest afterwards by staring blankly at the front of the room instead of down at their copy of the book, which supports the idea put forth by Singh and

Alexander (2022) that audiobooks are not necessarily useful for students with no reading or learning concerns.

Similar behaviors were recorded in my field notes during screenings of Joel Coen's *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, which was played after our daily readings. With the lights off in order to see the video projected on the SMART Board, many students felt that they could be on their phones without getting caught. Though they tried to hide what they were doing, I could tell that they were not paying attention due to the light illuminating their faces from their screens and the way their gazes were trained downwards instead of to the front of the room. The students were also more susceptible to falling asleep since the room was so dark, which I addressed by tapping the table and calling their names to wake them up.

At the same time, there were moments when students became completely engrossed in the film, proving that visual modes of content delivery have their benefits. Students immersed themselves in the viewing experience by laughing when the porter's character graced the screen, verbalizing their disgust when one of the Weird Sisters spit up the finger of a newborn babe, looking to one another in confusion upon hearing Lady Macbeth's low pitched screaming, and putting their phones away in anticipation of what would happen to Fleance, Banquo's son, with the arrival of the murderers. These actions signify behavioral engagement with the content. Several times students left class wanting to watch the film at home on their own time because they were captivated by the way Shakespeare's characters were portrayed in the film.

All in all, the students' verbal and nonverbal responses, as recorded in my field notes, revealed that audiobooks were unable to maintain student engagement over the duration of the unit and film largely engaged students with Shakespeare by immersing them in the play's atmosphere.

Students' Perceptions of Multimodal Approaches after the Unit

In the informal survey, I asked several questions pertaining to the modes of content delivery I implemented in the unit via a Google Forms survey. For the purpose of this study, I have narrowed my questions of focus down to whether or not: *the film adaptation played in class inform students' understanding of the play, the dramatized audio narration played in class inform their understanding of the play, taking guided notes and keeping their term journal help them better comprehend the text, and taking part in dramatic readings/performances of the play help them better comprehend the text.* The purpose of these questions were to determine which modes of instruction were more or less effective in aiding students comprehend Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. Of the sixteen participants that took part in my research, fourteen (88%) responded.

Did the film adaptation played in class inform your understanding of the play? For this question, students wrote a short-answer response detailing their honest opinions of the usefulness of Joel Cohen's adaptation of *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. Out of the 14 students who responded, eight students responded positively (57%), two responded negatively (14%), and the remaining four students responded indifferently (29%). While some students found it "hard to pay attention with the movie being in black and white" and thought that the film "moved really

slow,” the results of this portion of the survey showed that the majority of students found the film useful. The most notable responses revealed that students liked how Cohen “portrayed the characters” and represented the “old time feel” that is present in the original play. This partial survey data suggests that the film adaptation made the content more accessible for students because its visuals supported students’ understanding of characterization, setting, and the play’s atmosphere.

Did the dramatized audio narration played in class inform your understanding of the play? For this question, students were asked to write a short-answer response surrounding their attitudes towards the Folger Shakespeare Library’s fully dramatized edition of *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. Out of the 14 students who responded, six responded positively (43%), four responded negatively (29%), and four responded indifferently (29%). The most notable negative responses revealed that students found the recording “really hard to interpret” and “kinda boring.” However, students who responded positively declared that the audio “helped explain how the characters sound” and that the sound effects helped students “understand what was going on.” I was expecting the percentage of positive responses to be lower in comparison to the percentages collected in response to the prior question in accordance with Tusmagambet’s (2020) study, which determined that while audiobooks positively affect reading development, they do little to increase student motivation in improving their understanding of dramatic texts. However, I was not expecting the percentage of positive responses to drop lower than 50% because there were a number of students who expressed that they were “sad we did not listen to it more” throughout the unit as well as in their survey response. While this data does show that less students preferred aural modes of instruction, the majority of students still found this method useful in further interpreting dialogue and sequences within the play as they unfolded.

Did taking guided notes and keeping your term journal help you better comprehend the text? For this question, students wrote a short answer response regarding whether or not they thought taking guided notes and keeping a term journal as close reading strategies aided them in better understanding the text. Out of the 14 students who responded, nine responded positively (64%), one responded negatively (7%), and four responded indifferently (29%). Those who were indifferent towards these textual methods of content delivery shared that they “knew how to read dramatic literature” already, thus implying that the guided notes and term journal were strategies they were familiar with and did not promote or demote their comprehension of the text. The most notable responses from students who found this mode of instruction useful stated that these close reading strategies helped them “make more connections throughout the book” and “remember more” as they were reading, thereby indicating that textual modes make dramatic literature more accessible by improving reading retention.

Did taking part in dramatic readings/performances of the play help you better comprehend the text? For this question, students shared their opinions of the usefulness of participating in both Reader’s Theater and dramatized performances in their short answer responses. Out of the 14 students who responded, six responded positively (43%), six responded negatively (44%), and two responded indifferently (14%). Students who responded negatively

thought that partaking in Reader's Theater and dramatized performances were a "waste of time," "too chaotic," and made it "hard to pay attention." Conversely, students who found these verbal and kinesthetic modes of content delivery useful wrote in their responses that they helped them hear how "words would be portrayed" and see "what happened" in the play. This data shows that there is no consistent agreement between students about implementing readings and performances in instruction because their experiences with these styles are dependent on the skill level of themselves and their peers. Students are hesitant on relying on these modalities because they are afraid that themselves or their peers may be unable to enact the scenes properly and, therefore, further confuse their understanding of the play.

Ultimately, in analyzing these survey results, I was able to see what students identified as the most helpful mode of content delivery for themselves. While the preferred mode may vary depending on the chosen play, chosen film adaptation, chosen audio narration, and grade level among other factors, I learned that adopting a multimodal teaching approach benefited the many different types of learners present in my student teaching classroom by supporting their understanding of characterization, making the dialogue more accessible, improving their reading retention, and immersing them in Shakespeare's language.

Conclusion

Findings and Discussion

Analyzing the standards-based grading data I collected allowed me to calculate the percentage of students who met or exceeded the performance standard of the guiding questions packet. Making this calculation was very important because as an aspiring high school English teacher, I was striving for 80% student mastery. Anything lower than 80% student mastery was a signal to me that I needed to use a different modality to deliver the information. As previously mentioned, I noticed that there was a low percentage of class mastery later in the unit with only 70% of students meeting or exceeding the standards in Act I scenes 3 and 4, 77% of students meeting or exceeding the standards in Act III, Scenes 3 and 4. With the lowest percentage of class mastery during my student teaching experience being 70%, I determined that textual modes of content delivery were not unsuccessful in promoting reading comprehension, as the percentage of class mastery rose gradually over time to 77%, but that the data was affected by the depth of the instruction I provided. The student data, in this case, helped me determine that to help more students meet the performance standards, I need to be more consistent in implementing this instructional approach throughout the unit to familiarize students with close reading strategies.

I also found that taking field notes on students to observe variations in behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement with the material when it was delivered textually, verbally, kinesthetically, aurally, and/or visually allowed me to see which modalities worked best for certain students. In examining my observations, I was able to determine whether or not I needed to make any modifications in my teaching. Furthermore, my field notes reinforced the idea that learning styles vary between students. What appealed to one student did not always work for

another. Students need multiple avenues of processing information to truly succeed in the classroom.

Finally, the informal survey responses gave me insight into what students identified as the most helpful mode of content delivery in approaching dramatic literature. The responses revealed that students best understood Shakespeare when using close reading strategies with 64% of the participants responding positively to this textual mode of content delivery. Fifty-seven percent of students identified film adaptation as the second most helpful modality in aiding with comprehension of dramatic literature. The lowest percentage of students (43%) found aural, kinesthetic, and verbal modes of instruction beneficial in interpreting Shakespeare's text. The data shows that students preferred close reading strategies above all else. This result is likely the case because it is an approach that students are comfortable and familiar with, as this modality can be used to interpret any genre of writing, including complex texts like dramatic literature, and is often implemented across English classes.

Additionally, I found that there were students that responded negatively to each modality used. In other words, there was not one mode of content delivery that all fourteen participants (100%) agreed about being the most effective in aiding with comprehension. This finding only further supports the idea that multiple modalities be used in instruction to eliminate gaps in understanding and ensure every student has an opportunity to connect with dramatic literature.

Limitations and Implications

Like other studies referenced in this research, my self-study was not without its limitations. This research is restricted within my student teaching placement, which is a school with a higher population of White and higher income students. As a result, my data is not reflective of the population of students at large. Any future studies should include higher populations of students of color and low-income students. Additionally, a larger study should be conducted with a higher volume of participants of varying age to provide depth and variability of experiences. In addition, I would have collected audio recordings of student discussions and videos of student performances. Finally, I would have administered another informal survey to participants at the beginning of the unit to gauge which mode of content delivery student's preferred and compared those findings with the informal survey at the end of the unit to discern whether or not their opinions changed throughout the duration of the study.

For teachers designing units around dramatic literature, it might be helpful to incorporate the different modalities mentioned in this study. It is important to keep in mind that classroom communities are made up of all different types of learners and modes of content delivery that work best for some students might not be beneficial to others. Aside from implementing multiple ways of presenting information in instruction, teachers should ask students how they learn best to ensure that they are given the support they need during the unit.

I would suggest that researchers ask a larger pool of students across grade levels with differing racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds to participate in future studies. As previously mentioned, my study lacked diversity among research participants. Future findings could reveal different attitudes towards each of the five modalities exhibited by students.

With the rise in popularity of young adult Shakespeare retellings, like Gong's (2020) retelling of *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* in her novel *These Violent Delights*, I would also recommend that researchers study how such texts can be used alongside their original source material as a means of promoting comprehension and providing more ways for students to see aspects of themselves represented in what they are reading.

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