

Teaching Shakespeare through Collaborative Writing and Performance in a Norwegian Primary School ESL Classroom: An Interview with Ellen Marie Kvaale

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Ellen Marie Kvaale's effort in the classroom is a powerful example of how one teacher's passionate interest in Shakespeare leads to achievement in practice. Her highly successful three-year Shakespeare Project focused on using performance and collaborative writing methods to introduce three plays to Norwegian primary school students. Kvaale's project was not only effective in improving the students' subject skills, but resulted in the publication of the resultant student writing in an award-winning textbook series, the attendance of local government officials at the student performance, and several articles appearing in local newspapers.¹ Through a series of exchanges at the European Society for the Study of English's conference in Galway, Ireland where she was invited to present her project in the "Shakespeare in the Second Language Classroom" seminar, and later via email questionnaires, I interviewed Ellen Marie about her successful experience with teaching Shakespeare in her Primary ESL classroom.² Her presentation in Galway impressed us all as it demonstrated a successful example of engaging young ESL students with Shakespeare's language and stories. Our conversation was insightful and hopeful and should encourage others to develop new ways of engaging students to study English and improve spoken and written English through Shakespeare and other literature.



DBB: Thanks for agreeing to contribute to this article and interview, Ellen Marie. Why don't you introduce yourself and your background a bit?

EMK: I have a Certificate in Education from Oslo University College of Applied Sciences and followed IDEE courses (International Degree in English and Education) at Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences in The Netherlands. I have been teaching English for 14 years. My first years, I taught in The Netherlands at a secondary education and vocational

college, then I was an ESL teacher in China. The last 10 years I have been teaching English, among other subjects, at Hoberg Primary School, Norway, where I am also head of English Department. I have also conducted workshops on “Teaching Shakespeare in Primary Education” at Hedmark University of Applied Sciences.

DBB: What led you to choose to teach Shakespeare to your primary school students?

EMK: Some years ago, I was growing desperate. I was teaching English in the 5th, 6th and 7th grades, and the teaching materials that my school provided at the time were, in my opinion, very poor. The textbooks included only superficial topics and dull readings, while grammar was introduced only through “fill in the gap” exercises. Many of the students had developed a negative attitude towards studying English, and their oral and written skills were poor. I wanted to change this. I decided to use “proper” literature and drama with the students instead of the available teaching resources. My aim was to encourage the students to be enthusiastic about English. I hoped that my “alternative” classes would catch their interest, and help them expand their cultural knowledge, and most importantly, quickly improve their oral and written skills.

I chose to work with William Shakespeare simply because I like his plays myself. His texts are still relevant, as are the human relations and emotions that he describes, as much today as four hundred years ago. Moreover, I came across *Romeo & Juliet For Kids!* written by the Canadian teacher Lois Burdett which is just brilliant!³ This book inspired me, and I thought it should be possible to work much the same way with my Norwegian ESL students. In the last years, I have introduced three of Shakespeare’s plays using this series: *Romeo & Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Much Ado About Nothing* to my grade 5, 6 and 7 students at Hoberg Primary School.

DBB: What led you to choose the plays that you chose to work with?

EMK: I chose *Romeo and Juliet* for the fifth grade because I believed the students likely had prior knowledge about the play. Furthermore, the themes of love, death, betrayal, rebellion, and separation from parents, I believed would engage the students. In the 6th and 7th grades, I presented brief summaries of the three plays for the classes, and the students then voted on which play they would work on.

DBB: Describe, in general, your Shakespeare Project at Hoberg School?

EMK: During the three years of the project (2014-2016), the students read adapted texts of *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*. During the lessons we cowrote several familiar scenes. We modernized the text but remained true to the content of the original plays. Every week, students learned lines from new scenes and characters by heart and performed the scenes with fellow students. In this way, each student had to imagine who the different characters are and had to give their interpretations of the character. The entertainment factor was very high in all the performances!

My goal was to create engagement for English as a subject, to promote students' spoken and written English skills, and to give the students experience standing on a stage and performing a scene. Additionally, I wanted to get the students interested in English culture and literature. It was very important to me that every student felt that she or he was a part of the joint project, and that they felt they were creating something together that they could not do individually. Students were encouraged to follow their strengths. For example, those who love to dance choreographed dances for the performance. Those who enjoyed playing instruments or singing contributed with those talents during the performances. Those students who were interested in technology were given responsibility for sound and lighting. This gave the project a positive attitude and a spirit of collaboration. In the course of the project, the students also wrote several individual texts. We used assignments in several genres, including comics, poetry, diaries, and newspapers articles. Additionally, several of the texts were written collaboratively in school. The students were incredibly engaged and hardworking throughout. Several were astonished at their own potential and discovered that collaboration and persistence pay off in the long run. All the project writing tasks were process-oriented and demanding for both teachers and students, but there is no doubt that the work produced results!

The quality of the student texts and theatre performances attracted attention both in academic circles and with several publishers. One of the many texts written in the 6th grade English class was a "Romeo and Juliet Rap" that attracted the attention of two editors from Aschehoug Publishers who visited our class. They were so excited about our way of working with Shakespeare that the rap was subsequently published in their award-winning textbook series *Quest*.⁴ Moreover, our work was also referenced, and student illustrations published in *Twinkle, Twinkle*, a textbook for teachers training to teach English.⁵ Finally, the students were allowed to join me during several lectures I held for English teacher training students at

Inland Norway University of Applied Science. There is no doubt that close collaboration between university and classroom practice is educational for both students and teacher students.

DBB: Could you describe the lesson design and process, and what your goals were for the lessons?

EMK: I organized the project lessons into 8 to 12-week sessions divided into 6 weeks in the Autumn session, and another in the Spring. In the first week, the students learned about Shakespeare, his life, work, and times, which allowed for cross-curricular work in Social Studies. It included the students choosing one of Shakespeare's plays and reading Burdett's adaptation in class. To support the reading and include elements of culture, we watched scenes from various film and ballet adaptations. The students became very enthusiastic, so I decided we could turn our work into 45-90-minute theatre performances given in English. Keen to encourage student participation and engagement, I decided to include the students in rewriting some of the most familiar scenes.

DBB: Were there any specific teaching methods you used when you designed the project?

EMK: Not particularly. I did what I thought would be fun for the particular class group I was working with.

DBB: Can you give a general description of the class group/s you worked with?

EMK: There were 44 students, 18 boys and 26 girls, divided into 2 classes. There were four students with IEPs (individualized educational plans), one of whom has major learning difficulties. There were also four students with foreign language backgrounds. I had taught these students since the third grade in several subjects and was very familiar with them. This was a major advantage. Most of the students were very disciplined, and everyone knew what was expected of them. Several of them were quite self-driven as well.

DBB: Can you describe the routine in the classrooms at the different stages in the program?

EMK: Each session began with a short introduction where I went through the lesson plan. I reviewed the details of each assessment criteria I required of them. This guided their work and greatly contributed to the quality of the ongoing assignments. Students rarely received more than 15-20 minutes on a task before having to present it to the class to receive “feed-forward” response for the next session. This is how we moved through the project.

DBB: What about the language learning goals for the project? How did your project address the curriculum and assessment requirements?

EMK: Each task included grammar points dependent on genre requirements. For example, a diary entry or love letter should include many adjectives while a newspaper article would have many linking words. Additionally, students had to act as detectives during peer review to check if their partner has used articles correctly, etc. We also staged classroom “TV Debates” where we focused on both listening and speaking skills. I encouraged them to listen closely to understand their opponent’s views and react by expressing a different opinion in a coherent, well formulated, and logical manner. To improve reading skills, I selected new characters every week that the students had to get to know better. The students would then have to memorize lines and perform the character in front of class. To accommodate each student’s level of proficiency, I adapted several lines in addition to those we wrote collaboratively in class or those we included from the text. After the rehearsed performance, the students practice further oral skills by giving each other constructive feedback. This was hard work the two first years, but paid off in grade 7, and worked best when the students had developed good trust with each other.

To improve their writing skills, and to keep them motivated, students were encouraged to choose from different assignments every week. Their proficiency levels differed greatly, so the assignment options had to range from writing a simple 5-line poem to more complex tasks such writing a newspaper articles. Every week the students were given their individual written assignments to hand in on-line. This made for very interesting and engaging reading! The children also read many of their texts aloud in groups and received feedback from their fellow student. I also gave them written feedback, to guide revision of their papers. Most importantly, all assessment criteria were discussed and understood from the start.

DBB: Describe the process of collaborative writing on the project. How did students participate in co-writing the scripts? Or the text that was later published in the textbook? How were revision and editing decisions made?

EMK: After we read the scene in Burdett’s adaptation as a class, and as homework, we would watch the same scene in a variety of film adaptations. With *Romeo and Juliet*, I used films from 1968, 1996, and 2013.⁶ The students then worked in groups of ten to write their own versions of scenes, but sometimes the whole class worked together, depending on whether I had an assistant available. The groups were often given different scenes to work with, and because the process often took a lot of time, I tried to adjust the schedule so that I had a couple of double sessions a week. I was able to borrow a few hours from my other subjects on these weeks so that we could complete the writing in as short a time as possible.

I cleared away desks and made room for each scene in the classroom. I also had costumes available for the students to use in class. We then sat in a circle and imagined the stage and setting of the scene and brainstormed the action in both Norwegian and English. Initially, I presented vocabulary, phrases, and quotes that I wanted included in the text we were writing. I came up with suggestions for the first lines, then the students came up with more and more suggestions that I then projected on the screen. After a few minutes, we staged and tested what we had written so far. We then changed, improved, rejected, revised, and agreed on what we thought would work best on the stage. Slowly, but surely, the scene took shape. If we were not satisfied, we asked the other group to read and watch the performance and make suggestions for improvements. After we had worked on the scenes for a couple of weeks, we had about 4 to 6 scenes in place. Some of the more independent students chose to write more scenes as a homework assignment for the group. The class and I then looked over their texts and gave our input. Finally, I edited and polished the text, somewhat.

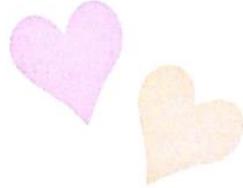
The “Romeo and Juliet Rap” printed in the *Quest* textbook was also collaboratively written by the students in the two school sessions where representatives from the publishers visited to see our work with Shakespeare. Students were divided into two different groups and they worked on creating different texts that might be used in the performance. The representative liked the rap very much and brought it back to Oslo for editing and inclusion in the textbook.

Romeo and Juliet Rap

Chorus:

Romeo and Juliet
Montague and Capulet
They loved each other more
But their families were at war

They met at the ball
And kissed in the hall
The parents got mad
And the couple got sad



(Chorus)

Their families fought for a very long time
And the fighting ended with a very big crime
Romeo and Juliet both ended up dead
"I can't live without you", was the last thing they said.

(Chorus)

Kajsa, Hedda, Elin, Rolander & Sondre 6A, Hoberg skole 2015



Love is a feeling you feel
when you feel
you are going to feel
the feeling
you have never felt before.

► After reading

- Work with a partner. Describe as many details as you can from this picture.
- What are Romeo and Juliet saying to each other?
- Romeo and Juliet are Italian. How can you tell this from the picture?
- Compare this painting to the painting on page 39. What is similar and what is different? Which painting do you like the best, and why?

Workbook tasks 1:34 – 1:44, Summing up



Figure 1. *Romeo and Juliet* rap. Anne Røise Bade, Maria Dreyer Pettersen, and Kumi Tømmerbakke, *Quest 7: Textbook* (Aschehoug: Oslo, 2016), 45.

DBB: Were any other teachers directly involved?

EMK: I did all the planning, teaching, and organizing myself. In one of the groups, I had an assistant which was very helpful. During the performance on the last three days, all the teachers in the class groups helped. They cancelled the regular class schedule, helped with

scenery, maintained order with the students during rehearsals, helped check and repair costumes, applied makeup, and supported students who still needed help remembering their lines and rehearsing their parts. I am very appreciative of the help I received from one colleague who helped with the sound and light rigging, and trained students who would be responsible for these parts of the performance in their roles. We would not have been able to complete the program without her.

DBB: Did you meet any resistance with the teachers you worked with? Or with school administration?

EMK: Yes, especially during the first few years, I met a great deal of resistance from some of my colleagues. Some were actually annoyed, or perhaps envious, because the students were so obviously excited about the lessons and happy with the English subject. They disliked that during my classes, all the kids eagerly participated and joined in, even students who were often difficult. The students all showed great engagement and committed themselves by putting in a lot of work during the lessons and at home. This was obvious to everyone. At times, this extended beyond their homework. One colleague even said, “The students don’t do their math homework because they say that English is more fun!”

The current school rector and assistant rector were particularly supportive of my work. They reserved the gym and the stage for an entire week before the performance so we could hold our rehearsals there. They participated in the performances, sat in the front row, and announced how proud they were of what the students had achieved. This gave the children a boost. The leadership also excused the students and I from regular teaching to hold workshops at the university where we held workshops for student teachers on how to work with Shakespeare in the classroom. This opportunity was very popular among the students.

DBB: What other aspects of the performance were important to its success and the students’ learning experience?

EMK: The costumes were very important. From day one I brought costumes into the classroom. This works wonders as it makes it easier for the kids and I to impersonate the different characters in the plays. Every child interprets a character or scene differently, and interesting discussions emerge from how we think the characters should talk and behave. In this way, we hoped to get closer to understanding Shakespeare’s world, his characters and

plays. After the twelve weeks, I directed a performance of the abridged play, implementing many of the students' own written work, and the scenes that we have been writing together in class. At this point, they really started feeling proud of what they had achieved. Based on the students' interests and skills, I give them one or more characters to play. Not everyone wanted to play a character or felt secure enough to use their language skills, for example. The choreographer created dances for every play, while others played music, sung, or were supportive with make-up artists while others were responsible for the sound and lighting systems. It was imperative that every single child felt a part of the project and experience, and that his/her contribution was essential to the performance. If not, the process and performances would end in utter chaos.

DBB: What do you see as the greatest achievement for your project, and were there any challenges to the process, in retrospect? Or, failures?

EMK: Working on Shakespeare has been great fun for all of us. During the process, most of the students greatly improved both their written and oral skills, often without being aware that they had been working at all. They were simply having fun. Also, it removed the fear that some had over "difficult" language. I would say some of the students also improved their self-confidence in the course of the project. The biggest challenge was planning. I had to plan every lesson carefully, and the tasks had to be specific and detailed. Initially, the biggest challenge was creating the model texts, which took a lot of time at the start of the project, but later, I was able to use the student's own texts as models.

As for failures, yes, as the project progressed, a few of the boys didn't want to participate because they thought it was boring and difficult on certain days. That was problematic, but I was delighted and thankful that I had assistants available that could help me on those more difficult days. At one point, when we rehearsed the performance in 5th grade, the class became a bit noisy and distracted while they were waiting their turn backstage. It was necessary to have several teachers in place to help maintain calm and order, otherwise it might have been a poor performance. But perhaps the project's achievements are best described in students from 7th grade's own words:

"It's fun and motivating to work like this because we can use our own imagination and we can develop due to constructive feedback. You always ask us what was good,

what we can do better. This make me critical to my own work in a good way. I look for things to improve when I work at home.”

“We feel responsible and we feel that you really care about what we think and mean. That is why we get dedicated and it makes us like and respect you because you seem to respect and care about us.”

“We feel engaged, the tasks have a purpose, we feel ownership to the tasks. Because we are motivated, we work harder. I feel proud of what I create, that is fun, and it makes me want to work even harder next week.”

“You focus a lot on content, but we still learn much grammar in a real context (our texts that shall be used in a proper play) which makes so much more sense than filling in exercises. We learn so much more than using a Textbook or Workbook where all you want is to finish a task as quickly as possible.”

Some students also improved their self-confidence in the course of the project. As some of my 11-year old students expressed (not without a bit of astonishment):

“I didn’t know I could write such stories at all! I didn’t think I had it in me”.

“I certainly didn’t think I could speak English fluently!”

“I did not believe I would ever dare to act on a stage in front of so many people!”

I believe this boost in confidence and skills has a lot to do with performing in front of family members, local primary schools, politicians and representatives of Norwegian Publishing Houses, and accompanying me and participating in my Shakespeare workshops. Those workshops give English students, aiming to become teachers, valuable first-hand experience of one way of introducing and working with literature in primary and secondary education. I hope that this way of introducing my students to Shakespeare and his work will make those future teachers excited about literature and lessen any fear they might have over his and other writers’ “difficult” language.

Finally, I believe that this work has contributed to creating unity and sense of community in the class groups. The students got to know each other better. They experienced hard work with clear results. They have seen that effort, engagement, and a will to improve

one's own work pays off. They have seen that they, themselves, can influence their own learning and teaching situations. It is a very important lesson to take away from this project.



For Ellen Marie Kvaale, the answer to “Why Shakespeare?” is easy to sense in her students’ words, and more evidently, from the success of her project which is measured through demonstrable, concrete examples in practice. The instructive details of her lesson and assignment planning offers an insightful resource for teachers of English in the ESL and EFL classroom to follow. What was not captured in the interview, but must be evident in reflection, is that Ellen Marie’s students surely came away with more than a familiarity with Shakespeare’s language, but with a deeper understanding, for example, of the emotions between Romeo and Juliet, of Puck’s trickery and the comedic confusion of the friends and couples in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, or of the sarcastic banter between Benedict and Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*. That they discovered this knowledge through performance and play is only another example of what teaching resources and adapted texts have encouraged in schools and higher education over the last twenty years, and that many case studies have successfully captured. What is less evident in the research and case studies is that students presented with Shakespeare, despite perceived difficulties with the language or the “irrelevance” of older literature, learn to recognize his plays, the sound of his poetry, and the dialogic interaction of his characters. It is precisely through performance and play that these critical elements of language learning become more memorable if only through the active use of prosody and physical movement. That, and a recognition of Shakespeare that may or may not lead to greater appreciation and future reading and inquiry which will allow students to employ the cultural capital of recognizing Shakespeare across culture and mediums.

Works Cited

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Notes

¹ Hanne Maren Torpen Hokstad, “Spiller på engelsk,” *Hamar Arbeiderblad*, 14 March 2016; Dan Cato Røe; “Ungdommelig tolking av Shakespeare” *Stangeavisa*, May 2015; Lars Kristian Seirstad, “Egen rap i skolebok!,” *Stangeavisa*, October 2016.

² Our exchange took place at times in Norwegian, at times in English, over many months. The translations from Norwegian to English are mine, and I have edited her English responses for coherence and clarity.

³ Since 1998, Lois Burdett has published eight books in the *Shakespeare Can be Fun!* Series with Firefly Books. Each book includes a play rewritten in rhymed couplets that include lines from Shakespeare’s original. The books are illustrated by students in Burdett’s classes in Stratford, Ontario, Canada. The illustrations include visual representations of characters and scenes, but also include reproductions of hand-written assignments. For example, letters, newspaper articles, and character descriptions, that Burdett assigned with the play. The books also have appendices that include pictures of in-class performances.

⁴ Anne Røise Bade, Maria Dreyer Pettersen, and Kumi Tømmerbakke, *Quest 7: Textbook* (Ascheoug: Oslo, 2016), 45.

⁵ Juliet Munden and Astrid Myhre. *Twinkle, Twinkle* (Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2015), 157.

⁶ Franco Zeffirelli. 1968 *Romeo and Juliet*. USA: Paramount Pictures; Baz Luhrmann. 1996. *Romeo + Juliet*. USA: 20th Century Fox; Carlo Carlei and Julian Fellowes. 2013 *Romeo and Juliet*. UK: Icon Productions.