

Shakespeare: unanswered questions

Level

Pre-intermediate and above (equivalent to CEF level A2–B1 and above)

Comment

This eLesson is about William Shakespeare, whose birthday (and date of death) is 26 April. It gives a few autobiographical details and also touches on some of the mysteries which still surround him. If students know little about this great literary figure, the text will serve as a useful introduction.

How to use the lesson

- 1 In silence, at the start of the lesson write up some Shakespeare plays which students might recognise: *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, etc. Ask students to shout out when they know the author, or 'playwright' (write this word on the board).
- 2 Elicit any information that students know about Shakespeare: when he lived; where he was from; why his work is so famous. Find out if any students have watched a (version of) a Shakespeare play and their reactions to them.
- 3 Project an image of Shakespeare onto the board or stick up a picture of him. Around his head write in large letters 'mystery' and 'unanswered questions'. Explain briefly that Shakespeare is surrounded by questions, such as how he died. Students may be able to offer other possible suggestions for mysteries relating to Shakespeare.
- 4 Students complete exercise 1. They will be able to predict much of the order without reading, so you could ask them to predict the order in pairs first. Monitor to help with any unknown words in the exercise rubric, e.g. *buried*. Refer students to the Glossary, where relevant. Write the answer key on the whiteboard for students to check.
- 5 Refer students back to the visual and the 'mysteries/unanswered questions' on the board (see stage 3 above). Students read the remainder of the text and answer the questions (exercise 2). Students in pairs compare answers before feedback. Monitor to check how they are doing.
- 6 Students complete the True/False task (exercise 3) independently, before checking answers in pairs. Early finishers could write one or two extra ones for their peers.
- 7 Students select and discuss what they found interesting or surprising in the text (exercise 4). Pick up on any points of interest.
- 8 Take away students' texts. Tell them that they have four minutes to brainstorm as many facts from the text that they can remember in a speed-writing competition/memory test, e.g. *Shakespeare was born in Stratford*. Each sentence should give ONE fact ONLY. At the end, see who has the most facts. The pair with the longest list should read theirs out, so that others can tick off any which are the same. Act as the referee, checking each point with the text.
- 9 Students complete the discussion task in groups of three (exercise 5), after providing some thinking time. Pick up on any points of interest.
- 10 To round off the lesson, choose one of the following tasks: EITHER students imagine that Shakespeare's ghost is about to come in their classroom to be interviewed.

Students prepare some questions in pairs (you/a confident student can be Shakespeare). OR, put up the words from his epitaph, which he himself wrote (see Related websites below):

*Good friend, for Jesus' sake, forbear,
To dig the dust enclosed here.
Blessed be the man that spares these stones,
And cursed be he that moves my bones.*

- 11 Ask students to try and decipher the 'code' in pairs. Ask: *What was Shakespeare trying to say? Do you think he knew that he was going to be famous?* Answer: Shakespeare requests that no one moves his bones, and curses them if they do so! Note that in those days, when the graveyard was full, people would sometimes dig up bodies to make some space for new ones.

Answer key

1

e, g, b, c, h, d, f, i, a

2 Wording of answers may vary.

- a Some of the unanswered questions referred to in the text are: *How did he spend his youth? What about his private life? How did a man with apparently little education become such an amazing writer? Where did he get all his money from? And also possibly: Who really wrote his plays? Did he write them alone?*
- b Shapiro concludes that Shakespeare was the author, but that he co-wrote (some of) them with others.

3

1 T; 2 T; 3 ?; 4 F; 5 T; 6 ?; 7 F; 8 ?; 9 F; 10 F; 11 T; 12 F

4 Students' own answers.

5 Students' own answers.

Related websites

The following websites might be useful, for either yourself or your students.

Biographical information:

<http://absoluteshakespeare.com/trivia/timeline/timeline.htm>

http://absoluteshakespeare.com/trivia/biography/shakespeare_biography.htm

<http://stromata.tripod.com/id300.htm>

<http://www.shakespeare-online.com/biography/>

The question of authorship:

<http://shakespeareauthorship.com/howdowe.html>

<http://www.onlineshakespeare.com/whowrote.htm>

Images:

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/5/5a/Cobbe_portrait_2009-03-09.jpg/421px-Cobbe_portrait_2009-03-09.jpg (the recently discovered Cobbe portrait of Shakespeare)

<http://chestofbooks.com/travel/england/John-Stoddard-Lectures/images/The-Epitaph.png> (epitaph on Shakespeare's grave)