



# Theater and arts in literature class for student engagement: What benefits? A potential solution to supposed youth disinterest in classical anglophone literature

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MEMOIRE DE MASTER 2  
METIERS DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT, DE L'EDUCATION ET DE LA  
FORMATION (MEEF) SECOND DEGRE – ANGLAIS

**Theater and arts in literature class for student engagement: What benefits? A potential solution to supposed youth disinterest in classical anglophone literature.**

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## Résumé

Ce mémoire de Master MEEF explore l'hypothèse selon laquelle les adolescents, et plus particulièrement les élèves de collèges et de lycées qui apprennent l'anglais comme seconde langue, seraient de moins en moins intéressés par l'enseignement des classiques de la littérature anglophone. Durant sa rédaction, son auteure s'est penchée sur plusieurs pistes visant à expliquer ce phénomène et plus particulièrement sur le rôle de l'enseignant et la manière dont les classiques de la littérature sont enseignés en classe de langue. Sont étudiées plusieurs activités impliquant les arts telles que l'utilisation du théâtre et du dessin en classe de langues et leurs apports potentiels quant à la motivation, la curiosité, l'autonomie ainsi que la compréhension de l'œuvre. Divisé en deux parties, avec tout d'abord une approche théorique se focalisant sur diverses recherches sur la motivation chez les adolescents ainsi que les précédents de l'utilisation de l'art en classe, suivie d'une partie appliquée présentant son expérience de recherche en lycée sur un extrait d'une œuvre de Shakespeare, ce mémoire étudie un exemple à la fois académique et didactique de l'utilisation de la littérature en classe d'anglais.

## Abstract

This MEEF research paper explores the hypothesis that teenagers, more precisely middle and high school students who are learning English as a second language, are growing less and less interested in classic English literature. In the course of writing this paper, the author explored several ways to explain this phenomenon, particularly the role of the teacher and the way in which classic literature is taught in language class. This research paper focuses on the use of drama and drawing in the language classroom, and their potential contribution to motivation, curiosity, autonomy, and general comprehension of English. Divided into two parts, with a theoretical approach studying research on teenager motivation and the precedents regarding the use of art in the classroom, followed by a concrete approach presenting her high school research experiment based on an excerpt from Shakespeare's most famous play, this research paper examines both an academic and a didactic example of the use of literature in the English classroom.

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## Introduction

When trying to decide what topic I would study in this research paper, I was told to look for an ‘issue,’ a problem per say, that could be observed in contemporary teaching and to try to understand and (possibly) solve it. One issue came to mind immediately: I had been wondering why middle school and high school students seem increasingly disinterested in classical anglophone literature. One memory suddenly reemerged, I was about 15 years old and entering my English class when we saw the words “William Shakespeare” written on the whiteboard. The class gasped, grunted, and sighed. No one wanted to work on the subject. They all knew about the author but the prospect of studying his work seemed intimidating, arduous, and downright boring to my classmates. After reminiscing about this complicated age that is teenagerhood and the approach my teachers took to teach us literature, I wondered whether my class was just slothful or whether the issue was universal. Thus, my first hypothesis was created: young students, and more precisely French teenagers, might generally be less interested in the classics.

But then, this first interrogation raised a second, and interdependent, question: why would students be so weary of learning about classical literature? Might it be the lack of cultural background and references, the topic itself or rather the way this topic is taught in schools? The first two options are in fact one and the same. Teaching the cultural background and shared references seems, to me, like the most crucial parts of teaching the topic itself; one of a teacher’s (numerous) missions is to open the students’ minds to a brand-new culture, and that entails giving them the necessary keys to understand general knowledge references, which include literature and most definitely includes the classics. Then it can be agreed that teaching such topics is essential to offering a complete understanding of the anglophone culture to our students, but the question remains- why is it so hard to get the students interested in the topic?

We are then left to consider the first option mentioned previously, perhaps we have been going about this issue wrong, perhaps the problem is not with the topic itself or what it includes (it is fairly obvious once you study Shakespeare, that most of the subjects he touches upon- gore, love stories and trivial jokes- should definitely be enjoyed by all crowds, including, and perhaps especially teenagers), perhaps the issue lies in the way those are taught to students, which is my second hypothesis. In this research paper, I will endeavor to look at the way classic anglophone literature is taught in a theoretical way, look at alternative ways to approach the subject and their theoretical benefits and finally, observe in a practical way how to implement

art-based teaching approaches, such as drama and drawing, through experimentation in French high school.

## I. A theoretical approach to teaching methods, academia, and the teaching of literature in middle and high school in France. Comparisons with foreign literature teaching.

One presupposed idea of this research paper is that teenagers and students of middle and high school are less and less interested in classical literature throughout the years or the generations. Modern technologies, a decreased attention span, or the rise of young adult literature (also called YA fiction) could be explanations for this growing disinterest in the classics. This first subsection will try to determine whether this assumption has been scientifically observed or not and the different factors at play.

### A) A general disinterest for classical literature in the youth?

*“According to Hall, the majority of adolescents find classic novels so difficult and dull that they can fall asleep before having read a single page.”*

(Dasoula, 2022, p. 34)

During my own years as a student, I noticed this phenomenon of-at best neutrality, in the worst cases despal and contempt- towards the anglophone classics. It seems like such novels are considered too hard or not appropriate to teach in high school and especially in middle school. Research has already been conducted on the recent emergence of young adult literature and its interest for English classes. However, a lot of this research could be read or interpreted as a comparison-or rather criticism- on classical literature: “Because [works] of young adult literature are about adolescents and for adolescents, they put students at the center of the learning experiences we devise. Because they illustrate for young readers what literature can be, moving them and revealing to them how literature builds knowledge and perspective, they use our time effectively.” (Gary M. Salvner, 2000, pp. 96-97)” (cité par Hayn, Kaplan & Clemmons, 2017).

#### A literature alienated from contemporary circumstances.

This highlights one of the main types of criticism that classical literature has to face: the supposed distance between the characters and themes of the time when they were written and



the present time. Students supposedly cannot identify with the characters: “Another issue of great debate and concern relates to whether classic literary texts are alienated from our contemporary world, and thus, how interesting they can be for modern [...] students” (Dasoula, 2022). But once again, this problem does not depend on the material itself but rather on the way it is presented to the students. If a teacher is able to connect the main themes of Shakespeare, Jane Austen or Mark Twain with contemporary issues, the students will be able to relate to the characters and be curious about what happens to them: “the impression literature leaves to [...] learners depends strongly on how the educator will engage them with the text and help them draw links to their daily reality” (Dasoula, 2022, p34-35).

### The comparison with young adult fiction

While this research paper does not aim at belittling YA fiction, research specific to the disinterest of teenagers in classical literature is scarce and finding these sources which compared the two types of fiction, at the expense of the classics, has been an opportunity to expand my horizons, see the other side of my hypothesis as well as bring me examples of this pre-supposed disinterest: “My assumption was that using young adult novels, since they are written specifically for young adults, would engage my students in ways classic literature had not” (Nichols-Besel, 2015, p. 17). However, both classic literature and YA fiction aim at the objective, helping the student better understand their society as well as a different culture. By being exposed to a range of different social situation in their second language, students are able to acquire such a socio-pragmatic skill through observation and appropriation of the text because indeed “[k]ey elements to communicative competence are pragmatic and socio-pragmatic competence, meaning the skill to use the language adequately and appropriately in different social contexts” (Dasoula, 2022, p.28).

### Creating links

The main argument that is used to compare YA fiction with classical literature is that since the main themes of YA fiction are centered around teenagers they would engage and motivate the students more than the classics. However, Nichols-Besel found in her thesis experimentation that “some students still seemed uninterested in reading the texts” (2015, p.17). Even YA fiction has its limits in engaging the students. And while it is obvious that “a single text can never be equally popular among students, as individual interests and preferences are extremely diverse” (Dasoula, 2022, p. 35), perhaps one should wonder whether this disinterest is a reaction to reading and literature in general, not just the classics.

## B) Traditional teaching methods and their results.

*“In general, motivation “influences adolescents’ choices of which activities to do . . . activates adolescents’ behavior . . . [and] influences how committed they are to the activity”.*

*(Wigfield, 2004, p. 60)*

### Intrinsic versus Extrinsic motivation

One should therefore look at interest, or motivation, in the education field in general. First of all, it must be established that there are two types of motivation: extrinsic and intrinsic. “Intrinsic motivation most commonly refers to the desire to engage in an activity because one is interested in and finds enjoyable the activity itself and does not require incentive outside the activity to remain engaged in it (Alderman, 2004; Artelt, 2005)” (cited by Nichols-Besel, 2015, p. 14/15). Intrinsic motivation is to be contrasted with extrinsic motivation, which is fueled by rewards (such as grades, prizes...etc). Researchers in the 1990s found out that “intrinsic motivation is conducive to creativity and extrinsic motivation is almost always detrimental to it (Amabile, 1983, 1996)” (cited by Sansone & Harackiewicz, 2000, p.58).

This would mean that most of the education system has been in the wrong since rewards have been praised as fueling creativity in students. Sanson & Harackiewicz talk about how: “[t]eachers learn that if they want their third graders to continue with their efforts to master the multiplication tables, they should reward. them for their progress. And employers believe that incentive systems that dole out everything from monetary bonuses to trophies are a necessary component of a productive work environment” (2000, p. 58).

### The traditional grading system and the SBG grading system

Throughout most of our education, grades are valued as the ultimate reward for good work, but what if they were actually detrimental to our creative instincts? This can be nuanced by the following results: “Over the years, investigators employing variations on this same basic research methodology have found that the promise of reward is not the only extrinsic constraint that can undermine intrinsic task motivation and, as a consequence, creativity of performance. In fact, a number of environmental factors can often lead to decrements in intrinsic motivation. “Expected reward, expected evaluation, competition, restricted choice, surveillance, and time limits have each been demonstrated to decrease intrinsic interest and creativity. (Hennessey, 2000) Yet of all the killers of motivation on this list, none has received more research attention than expected reward” (Sansone & Harackiewicz, 2000, p.60).

We have seen that many varied factors impact intrinsic motivation negatively. Those factors such as “expected reward, expected evaluation, competition, restricted choice, surveillance, and time limits” (Sansone & Harackiewicz, 2000, summary) are fundamental elements of the traditional education system, especially in exam settings but also in regular classroom setting. Students are pressured by a maximum time limit, a minimum number of words and are expecting a reward in the form of a grade which might leads them to understand classroom activities as a contradictory assignment: on the one side, they are required to exhibit real interest and curiosity since the teacher is trying to stimulate their intrinsic motivation but they are also expected to be motivated by grading systems: “If students are [...] only interested in their grades, [...] they are unlikely to exhibit the curiosity and ability to be critical that their teachers hope to see” (Nichols-Besel, 2015, p. 11).

This raises many questions because our education systems are deeply rooted in the grading system. Grades are not to be banned entirely since “[they] are used to provide feedback (Guskey, 2015; O’Connor, 2011), promote or retain students (O’Connor, 2009), identify students for special classes (Guskey, 2015; Vatterott, 2015), grant admission into colleges or universities (Guskey, 2015; Reeves, 2011), and provide college scholarships (Reeves, 2011)” (Knight, M., & Cooper, R., 2019, p.1).

Even though grades can be beneficial for students to find their place in academia, they are also used as a social and behavioral tool: “for almost a century, academic grades have been used as a mechanism for managing adolescent behavior (Guskey, 2009; Vatterott, 2015). Teachers raise or lower grades to control behaviors such as effort, work completion, work timeliness, attendance, class participation, and compliance with rules and expectations; some parents invoke or revoke certain privileges based on their children’s report cards.” (Knight, M., & Cooper, R., 2019, p.1)

In the United States, an alternative grading system was created, called the standards-based grading system (or SBG system) which is defined as follows: “In a traditional grading system, points or percentages are recorded for each assignment or assessment, and all scores are averaged together to calculate a final course grade. In SBG, however, grades are determined based on students’ proficiency on a predetermined set of skills with the goal of more clearly communicating students’ academic strengths and weaknesses to students, parents, and other educators (Scriffiny, 2008)” (Knight, M., & Cooper, R., 2019, p.1) This can be compared to the “*compétences*” grading system in France, where students are graded on how proficient they are on a set of skills such as oral comprehension, oral production, written comprehension and

written production, following the “Cadre Européen Commun de Référence des Langues Vivantes” (or CECRL). In the middle school where I did my first year of teacher training, sixth graders were not graded using the traditional twenty points grading system, but just using the “*compétences*” system. I was told, however, that after seventh grade and on, students had to be graded out of twenty to ensure their acceptance in French high schools where the only grading system is the traditional one.

Such a use of grades has deeply rooted them in our society and has led students to believe that they were the only thing that mattered, causing a sizable number of them to learn everything by heart for an exam and then promptly forgetting it all as they left the exam room. This is perhaps part of the problem with teaching literature, how can we expect students to be interested by the classics if they are only presented to them as a tool only designed to check or grade their understanding of English?

### The reading-comprehension approach

*“La littérature stabilise, produit, actualise et anticipe certaines visions du monde, elle est en ce sens un “boulevard”, “un tremplin” pour les études culturelles. Elle permet d’expliquer une pluralité de personnages, de situations, de cultures, etc. et ainsi d’éviter la référence à un seul modèle érigé en vérité universelle.”<sup>1</sup>*

*(Chrifî Alaoui, D., 2007, p.67)*

The only experiences with literature that I had as a student were the traditional academic comprehension questions. The teacher gives out a text (usually taken from a didacticized textbook) accompanied by reading comprehension questions, the students have a limited amount of time to read the text and answer the questions, then the whole class corrects and writes down the correct answers to the questions. “Most of the time, in textbooks offering didactics of literary texts, the approach is often semantic, focused on checking comprehension. Often the text simply becomes a pretext [...]” (Alaoui, 2007, p.20), a pretext to grade the

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<sup>1</sup> Notre traduction: “Literature stabilizes, produces, updates, and anticipates certain visions of the world, it is in this sense a “boulevard”, “a springboard” for cultural studies. It makes it possible to explain a plurality of characters, situations, cultures, etc. and thus to avoid the reference to a single model erected as a universal truth.”

*(Chrifî Alaoui, D., 2007)*

student's understanding of English, but not really to experience, focus on or appreciate the text for its literary or poetic value.

This type of reading comprehension activity allows for the teacher to let the students work on their own and to search for and select essential information in a text to access its core meaning. It is however observed that such an approach leads to “a dissatisfaction with an artificial side emphasized by the didactics researchers and conventionally accepted by all the actors of the pedagogical field: the absence of real individual speech” (Alaoui, 2007, p.35). By only following the reading comprehension questions, students are stuck in a specific way of interpreting the text and are not left to experiment with it. Comprehension questions are safer because they ensure global understanding but by preventing the students from experimenting or even temporarily misunderstanding, one might prevent any personal interpretation or even intrinsic curiosity that could be fueled by a literary text. This deprives students from experiencing literature in an organic, genuine, and almost metaphysical way.

### C) Art-based teaching methods and supposed benefits.

*« Un sujet fait toujours entendre, à travers son discours, plusieurs voix [...] »<sup>2</sup>*  
(Todorov, 1985: 12).

After describing in detail how literature is taught today, following the reading-comprehension academic way, one shall now look at art-based ways of teaching such a subject, to preserve the authentic experience of literature and grant the students an access to all the dimensions of the classics.

#### The potential benefits of theater in language class

During the first stages of the development of this paper, I first thought about focusing my research on the potential benefits of theater/drama in literature class. As embodied goes,

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<sup>2</sup> Notre traduction : “A subject always gives voice, through his speech, to several voices [...]”

letting the students get up, move around, and embody literature text can be considered as a good example. It destroys the traditional rules of one's classroom as well as shifts the roles, where the teacher can be taught, and the students can teach. "Theater opens up a space for creativity in languages, a space of choice (for teachers, students, artists), of co-action and creation, which corresponds to the very nature of authentic communication in which non-verbal expression is a support for emerging speech" (Eschenauer, 2014, p.6). In pedagogy, one is taught to reduce the teacher's presence in the classroom when one can, as to allow the students to become autonomous and give them room to express themselves, drama is a way to achieve this.

Theater can also give students a feeling of security in the right conditions, when, especially in high school, they might be scared of speaking in front of their peers because of feared judgement or mockery. "Theatrical language allows 'trans-language' in a 'transitional,' 'safe space' (Winicott) between simulation and reality" (Eschenauer, 2014, p.10); Since the students are not forced to express their own personal, sometimes hidden feelings, they feel freer to embody a character, therefore not directly exposing themselves, and to express otherwise 'taboo' or 'uncool' emotions as pointed out by Alaoui. "The distanced speech as that of the disembodied actor (such as Jovet conceives it), allows from this point of view an authentic investment of the individual speech. The learner playing a non-functional role but belonging to an aesthetic universe, an outside world, appropriates the language act and its linguistic form in a certain way. He embodies a word that he knows to be aesthetic not necessarily thanks to his linguistic knowledge but to that universal sensitivity which is the aesthetic feeling or even the perception of strangeness" (Alaoui, 2007, p.39).

But the fact that students play a role does not mean that the experience does not enable them to reflect on themselves: « theatrical roles challenge the actors involved in a holistic way, and by its forms of play and interaction, it implements social processes such as self-perception processes» (Sting, 2010, p. 206) because it establishes social situations and contexts which are sometimes universal, sometimes relevant to any number of individuals. Indeed, "[t]heater naturally brings into play situations of contact and most often thematizes the relationships between individuals, as well as introspective questioning" (Eschenauer, 2014, p.8); Therefore, theater can create this 'individual speech or perspective' that is currently missing from language classes: "It is also in this way that theater can provide an authentic individual voice. Geneviève Zarate, (1986: 39), writes: "The language class invites an awareness of the mechanisms of identity: in the confrontation with the other, it is a definition of oneself that is constructed" (Alaoui, 2007).

### The essential interaction with 'the other' in language and in art

*« Parler dans une autre langue c'est aussi être un personnage, un autre, un alter que l'on ne soupçonne pas. »<sup>3</sup>*

(Todorov, 1985: 12)

The aim of teaching a second language is always to broaden students' minds to a different culture, different horizons, other ways of life and more generally to the existence of the other and, even more than to tolerate it, to appreciate such an existence: "The important thing, in this respect, is to establish, between these cultures, connections, relations, articulations, passages, exchanges. It is not only a question of managing the juxtaposition of various cultures as well as possible, but of putting them in reciprocal dynamism, of enhancing them through contact" (Porcher, 1995: 53). It seems interesting to study "how artistic practices create a link, a bridge, a springboard between first and second languages" (Alaoui, 2007, p.8). This link can seem hard to create, or even scary to some students, that are intimidated by the perspective of having to learn an entire grammatical system (sometimes far from their native language's one), scared by the judgement of their peers who might laugh at their struggling with stress patterns or even pronunciation in general.

Artistic practices (which encapsulate a broad spectrum of materials and techniques, such as poetry, drama, drawing, movies...etc) can soften this approach to another language: "The anxiety-inducing character of learning is softened in poetry, and the enemy language is mastered because it is harmless: poetry waits for the reader, it asks for nothing. And this is the tenderness and delicacy of art, I would even say the elegance of art and artistic practices [...]. It is a polite host who waits for the appropriation of the individual, the group, and the history of the man" (Alaoui, 2007, p.22).

The reading-comprehension teaching method tends to emphasize the difficulty to create this link since it establishes that students need formal comprehension techniques such as question to be allowed access into their second language. Using the aesthetic aspect of a language could be a way of breaking down this separation by returning to the fundamental nature of language: "Language cannot be considered as a sum of established "facts" (in school, we study the "faits de langue"). It is a phenomenon perpetually in the process of realization and renewal in the interaction with others [...]. It is a creative act, constructed within and without

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<sup>3</sup> Notre traduction: "To speak in another language is also to be a character, an other, an alter that one does not suspect."

oneself through all the means of expression that inhabit us. Theatrical language draws on this natural resource, which it potentiates through its aesthetic form, relying on space and the non-verbal”<sup>4</sup> (Eschenauer, 2014, p.10).

### Embodying language

*“Ces éléments [qui] sont déposés en nous, à partir de nos diverses expériences, de nos sensations, de tout ce que nous avons regardé, écouté, touché, goûté. Tout cela reste dans nos corps et constitue le fonds commun à partir duquel vont surgir des élans, des désirs de création. »*<sup>5</sup>

(Lecoq, 1997, p. 57)

While it is interesting to consider language learning through the prism of experiencing a different language through reading and listening, I’ve always felt like there was a dimension missing from this experience, this has been defined in French as “*corporéité*” or embodiment which is at the center of cognitive linguistics where it “essentially designates the conceptualization of the subject's embodied relationship to the world through multimodal motor and sensory engagement, and the traces that these representations leave in language formalisms (organization of the lexicon, constructions)” (Bottineau, 2011-2012, p.2).

This branch of linguistics is decidedly in contradiction with Chomsky who “claimed that the brain has a linguistic organ, like any other organ, which grows stronger with training. Chomsky referred to it as the ‘language acquisition device’” (cité par Al-Harbi, 2020, p69-73) but “considered that the body and experience played no structuring role in the cognitive fact” (Bottineau, 2011-2012, p. 6-7). Reading comprehension teaching methods tend to focus more on the abstract value of communication of knowledge and language (the words, theoretical grammar) than on the concrete use of the body to deliver and express the ideas and emotions behind these words: “with regard to the body in the classroom, didactics, like linguistics, has for a long time considered the mimo-gestural elements as less important than the verbal elements. This is perhaps due to the fact that the verbal is at the center of learning (object of learning and object of transmission) and that the gestural aspects are considered secondary.” (Cadet, Leclère, Tellier, 2017, p.6)

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<sup>4</sup> Notre traduction

<sup>5</sup> Notre traduction: “*These elements are deposited in us, from our various experiences, our sensations, everything we have looked at, listened to, touched, tasted. All this remains in our bodies and constitutes the common fund from which will arise impulses, desires of creation.*”



Cognitive linguistics aim at giving back its place to the body in language learning: “The “embodiment” of which it is question here is that of the “cognition” as a process of conceptualization carried by the individual motor and sensory experience of the physical dimension of the material world, including the whole body of the experimenter [...]” (Bottineau, 2011-2012, p.4) This objective can be fulfilled by implementing a theatrical practice in the classroom, allowing students to access the “aesthetic, experiential and emotional dimensions inherent to all forms of language” (Eschenauer, 2014, p.6).

### The potential benefits of the use of comics in language class

The only art-based experience I had as a student was when my high school English teacher gave us an extract from *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding to study, she then asked us to get into groups and to draw the extract in the form of a comic book. This particular assignment was part of the reason for the existence of this research paper because it was so successful and led to such a great and unique experience of the text.

Comic books seem like the most relevant literary form when it comes to teenagers: “by adding up the figures for comics, manga, and comic books, 64% of young people's favorite reading material is graphic narration, also known as ‘comic literature’ (Centre national du livre-Ipsos, 2016, p. 33)” (Groensteen, 2007, p. 7) and moreover “according to the results of the 2011 survey conducted in France by the Bibliothèque publique d'information (BPI) and the Department of Studies, Forecasting, and Statistics (DEPS) of the Ministry of Culture, 11- to 14-year-olds [...] constitute the highest proportion of comic book readers: 90% of them report having read comic books in the past 12 months” (Evans, Gaudet, 2012, p. 3). These figures suggest that teenagers grow increasingly distant from classic literature forms such as traditional novels and increasingly consume comics.

Comics are a mix between two artistic forms: literature, with the presence of a written plot which mostly takes the form of short dialogues; and drawing, with the creation of small frames depicting the characters and the background. They cut off the intermediate need for language to describe the context since it is visually represented by drawings. They offer a more immediate access to the text and allows for an easy comprehension of the plot, which might explain their success in the younger age groups.

Comics are rarely used in language classes: “a literalist reading of the programs pushes school publishers to mechanically reduce the place of comics, their study, and this sometimes without giving other forms of image a place other than decorative. This sudden reversal due to

the official programs of 2008 seems paradoxical at a time when this complex art shows a tremendous artistic vitality (formal explosion, drawn concerts, digital comics ...) and economic (4863 titles published in French in 2009)” (Bomel-Rainelli & Demarco, 2011, p.25) despite being the most popular literature form in teenage age groups.

Using the format preferred by students and adapting it to the classroom might be an effective way of stimulating intrinsic motivation and students’ interest in literature: “Researchers distinguish between two types of interest: personal, or individual, and situational. [...] Personal or individual interest develops over time and is independent of a specific situation or context while situational interest is specific to a particular context and is often short-lived. Both personal and situational interest have been linked to increases in reading comprehension (Guthrie & Knowles, 2001)” (Cité par Besel, 2015, p.14). If a teacher can fuel their students’ personal interest by converting it and bringing it into the context of school, it might boost both types of interest and lead to a more motivated class.

#### Offering the students a choice

*« Le beau est un sentiment qui n’est pas élitiste et réservé au seul détenteur de la langue (niveau avancé) mais au contraire une immédiateté souvent négligée dans les progressions. Et surtout pour les débutants. »<sup>6</sup>*

(Alaoui, 2007, p.72)

The main aim of this research paper is to determine whether or not it is possible to fuel student motivation by using art-based methods of teaching literature. It appears that when students are in a position that allows them to make a choice, it boosts their interest for the activity. As Alderman (2004) points out: “[t]he more students determine their actions, the more intrinsic their motivation” (p.248) (cited by Besel, 2015, p.5). This is a reason why theater could be used as a tool. By offering multiples choices to the students, such as which role they want to play, what part of the text they would like to learn or cut out or even just the opportunity to choose the tone and the density with which they want to express the feelings and emotions and characters, theater is a great catalyst of decisions. This can also be said

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<sup>6</sup> Notre traduction: « "Beauty is a feeling that is not elitist and reserved only for the holder of the language (advanced level) but instead an immediacy often overlooked in progressions. And especially for beginners." »

about drawing or the use of comics in class, as the students can choose how to portray an extract, which support to use, or even what part of the dialogue to highlight and what the backgrounds and characters look like.

These variations lead to a greater range of interpretations and an even finer understanding of the studied extract, which is only possible by “hav[ing] several students choose the same excerpt, in order to understand the notion of narrative choices in the confrontation of the versions” (Bomel-Rainelli & Demarco, 2011, p.22). This phenomenon has already been observed in previous research on the use of theater in French as a second language class: «Many French colleagues report that the students who benefited from this practice were "finer" and understood literary texts well even though their recent "linguistic baggage" was light » (Alaoui, 2007, p.57).

#### The problem of grading art-based teaching methods

Since the traditional grading system is structured around more traditional teaching practices, it can be hard to grade the productions that came out of teaching literature through theater or art in general. Which criteria should be used to grade a comic or a dramatic performance? If one grades imagination or creativity, how can they ensure the grades be fair? Bomel-Rainelli, B. & Demarco (2011, p. 23) proposed the following solution when grading the production of comics: « the students write the synopsis of their board(s) in about fifteen lines, answering the questions: Who/What? Where/When? How? Why? [...] They also write down the text that will be read, and its form: box, speech bubble, onomatopoeia. This formatting is evaluated, to emphasize the importance of these purely textual steps.”

## II. A practical approach: experimentation.

### a) Conception and preliminary interrogations

The development of this research experimentation went through several phases. It is aimed at understanding the negative attitude that I have observed throughout my own school years towards classic anglophone literature. A most compelling example is the attitude of French students towards Shakespeare that I could observe when I was a middle school and high school student myself, perhaps the most well-known English author in the world. However, finding a ‘cure’ could not be obtained solely through battling the symptoms (i.e., the lack of enthusiasm and sometimes rejection by the students) but rather in discovering the cause. Many different hypotheses could be offered: a lack of modernization and the impression that Shakespeare topics are no longer relevant to today’s world and society (most of his works dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century); an approach that could be perceived as too academic, with the traditional tools of pedagogy such as a study of the text linked to a panel of questions designed at making sure students understood the vocabulary and premises but rather far from how the texts were meant to be experienced in the view of the author; or, a certain fear of not understanding the text at all, as the original sources are in a version of English that is not used today, especially when modern English is the pupil’s second language and therefore might already be an obstacle in itself.

This research paper will mostly focus on the second theory (“an approach that could be perceived as too academic, with the traditional tools of pedagogy such as a study of the text linked to a panel of questions [...] far from how the texts were meant to be experienced by the author”) but all of them are worth mentioning. A different experiment would be required if the main cause of disinterest was the teacher factor. My very first idea was to use drama as my main approach for two reasons. First of all, drama was Shakespeare’s original medium and how he meant for people to enjoy his writing was through live performance. The second reason was that having students actually stand up, choose a character, and perform gives them more agency and decision-making power, which might help motivating them. It would also make any misunderstandings more obvious because any confusion would entail an incorrect performance and have real-time consequences. At first, I was planning to only explore this approach because I thought I would only rely on the learners’ first core reactions to being told they were going to work on Shakespeare (expecting exasperation or negative comments) and a preliminary

questionnaire, comparing those to their body language during the activity and a post-experiment questionnaire.

As my research continued, I understood that this approach might not be the best since it would not offer enough comparisons. Drama is also quite a specific activity which might not be enjoyed by every student, especially the more shy and introverted ones. Which is why I decided to introduce a parallel activity, which could be done individually or by pairs, a written form: the option to draw the scene in any style that the learners might like to explore. This option might encourage the introverted students to be creative and invested in the activity without putting too much pressure on them to perform in front of other students. This would also be a way to compare two art-based teaching methods and their flaws and advantages, adding more depth to the experimentation.

#### The different steps of the experimentation

At this point, I had planned the experimentation in three phases: the initial reactions and preliminary questionnaire; the experimentation itself, divided into two available activities which the students could choose between and an observation of their body language; and finally, a post-experiment questionnaire which I could compare to the first one. This would have been enough to assess how students enjoyed art-based teaching approaches but had a major flaw: it would not be conclusive in comparing more traditional and art-based methods, since it would take the former out of the classroom. I realized there would be little to no interest to this first plan which is why I decided to create a control experimentation subject: a group that would not take part in the less traditional methods, but which would be told to work on the same extract of the play as the other two groups but through a written set of questions. I would also try to stimulate this group's creativity through a traditional written assignment to write the rest and/or the end of the extract. This control group would also have to undergo the preliminary and post-experiment questionnaires and their answers would be compared to the ones of the two other groups.

#### The ethics questions raised by the experiment: how can I make this experiment fair for all the students?

This decision while being hugely beneficial to my research led me to some ethical questioning. How would this third group react to being the control group and having to 'work more' than the other two, which would be able to indulge in more entertaining activities. Would it be unfair to the test control group? How could I ensure that the attribution of activities was

fair? Which is when I decided that I would let the groups pick themselves at random, I would ask the students to form three equal groups and then hold out three pieces of papers with their group number on it for them to pick, this method would ensure a fair distribution of activities.

### A summary of the experimentation

The final draft of the experimentation was thus elaborated:

1. a preliminary questionnaire, given out a few weeks before, to get their first reactions and overall impressions of William Shakespeare and his work;
2. the experiment which would consist in three different activities which would be given out at random between three equivalent groups, an 'academic approach' group which would be given the same extract as well as questions, an approach through drama and an approach through art, allowing students to draw the extract;
3. concluded by an immediate post-experiment questionnaire aimed at collecting their impressions of the three activities and giving them a space to express any complaints or suggestions on which activities they would have rather done.

#### b) Pre-experiment

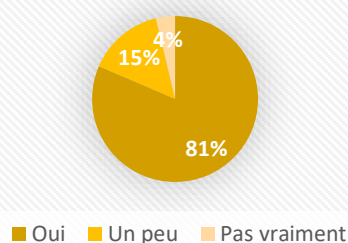
This experiment was conducted on a class of première spécialité students, on a group containing twenty-seven students and over the span of 2 hours. This particular group was chosen because they had an overall satisfactory level and enough curiosity to allow them to understand the text quite well but also for a more practical reason: because they were the only group with a two-hour class, the time necessary to fully indulge in all three activities. Two weeks before, the group was given pre-experimentation questionnaires to assess their original knowledge and personal experience of William Shakespeare. The questionnaires contained six questions in French, five of them had multiple set answers from which the learners could choose, and they were free to answer the last one with their own words. The aim of this questionnaire was to get the learners' mindset and potential apprehension concerning the study of Shakespeare's text material.

The instructions were given out to them in French to prevent any misunderstandings and they were given about 10 minutes to fill in the questionnaires, while I was standing aside, ready to help or answer any questions that might have arisen. Once the questionnaires had been filled, they were handed back to me, and I started analyzing the data.

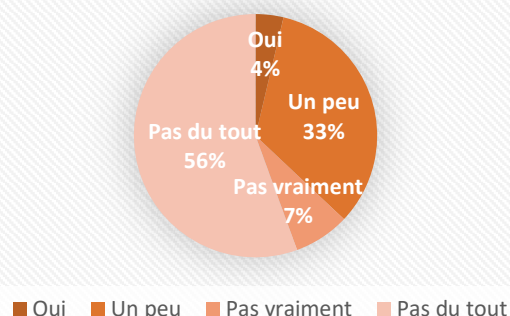
### Results of the pre-experiment questionnaires

The results of the pre-experimentation questionnaire were generally comforting my initial hypothesis because a majority of students had heard of William Shakespeare (=22/27) had never worked on the subject in school (=15/27), did not really want to work on it (=17/27) and would not really or not at all want to read Shakespeare outside of school (=17/27). A minority of students expressed enthusiasm (=10/27) and even fewer said that they would be willing to read Shakespeare for pleasure (=5/27). These answers confirmed my initial hypothesis that high school learners were neither enthusiastic nor motivated to study William Shakespeare.

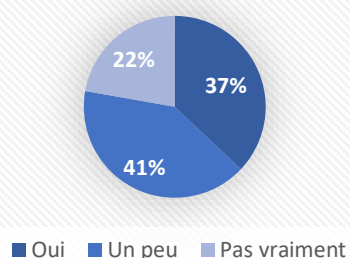
#### **Question 1: As-tu déjà entendu parler de William Shakespeare?**



#### **Question 2: As-tu déjà travaillé sur ce sujet en classe?**

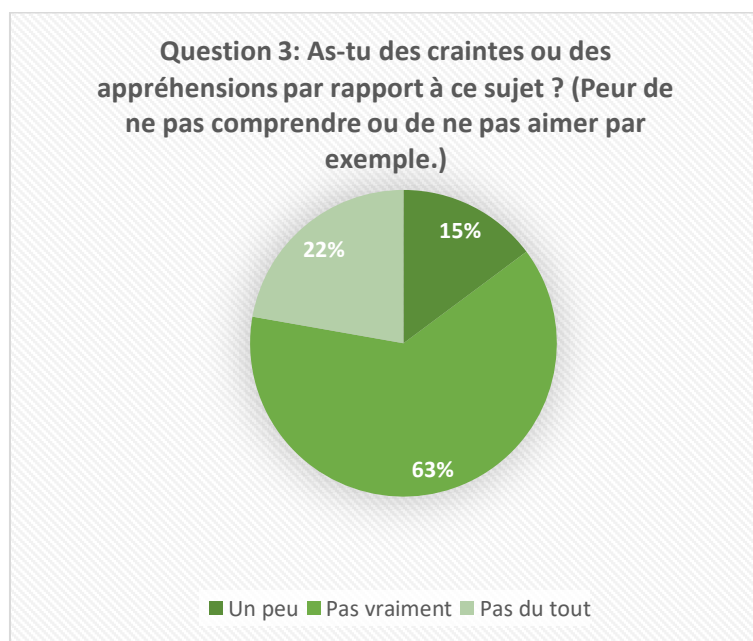


#### **Question 4: Aimerais-tu travailler sur ce sujet?**



There was however, one answer which did not fit in with my expectations. None of the students expressed any apprehension or anxiety at the idea of studying Shakespeare: six students out of twenty-seven said they were not anxious at all, seventeen out of twenty-seven declared not being really anxious, while only four out of twenty-seven said they were only a little apprehensive; zero out of twenty-seven said yes (0%). My initial standpoint theorized that

students might not be motivated to study Shakespeare because they might have been afraid of not understanding the texts studied. This answer motivated my choice to give the students both a modern translation as well as the original text during the experimentation. At first, I was planning on only giving them the modern English translation but having the original version at hand does give them a more complete experience. Seeing that the learners were not apprehensive encouraged this decision.



#### Giving the students an opportunity to voice their opinion directly

The last question on the questionnaire was not multiple choice but a little more precise and guided. It was meant to be a space where the learners could express any comments or suggestions on the topic or how to make it more interesting to them. I also gave them the opportunity to write about any potential anxiety or just their general opinion on the author. Most students did not answer this question, only twelve students out of twenty-seven answered. Their answers can be divided into three categories: general opinion, complaints, and suggestions.

First of all, five students gave their honest opinions (originally in French, translated in English by me):

“This subject can be or might seem boring, but I think it is interesting to broaden one’s knowledge.” This answer is interesting because this learner did admit that there is a negative stereotype about Shakespeare and that they were not interested in studying this topic. However, this learner also expresses some interest and curiosity.



“No comment, I just want to say that it is not a subject that I am interested in.” This answer speaks for itself and expresses a negative outlook on Shakespeare and an overall lack of motivation.

“I do not know him enough to have an opinion, I just know he is very famous in the field of drama.” This learner has never worked on Shakespeare before and also answered to question 3 (‘Do you have any anxiety or apprehension?’) by writing: “I do not feel comfortable with this subject, but it seems interesting”.

The two other students expressed similar views; they did not know a lot about Shakespeare but very generally interested to discover the topic.

On the other hand, two students wrote negative answers.

“I am afraid that it will be too hard to read.”

“Afraid of not understanding and being off topic.”

These two students both wrote that they had studied Shakespeare a little before and that they were a little apprehensive about this topic. They however both replied, ‘Yes’ to question 4 (‘Would you like to work on this topic?’).

Finally, five students gave suggestions on how to make this topic more interesting:

“Modernize the way to approach the topic. Lighten it, for example by organizing a group activity, or even group oral presentations.” This idea of modernizing Shakespeare is remarkably interesting because it has been at the heart of a lot of literature research and pedagogy. A lot of teachers, especially in younger grades have tried to adapt and modernize the classics to grasp the learners’ attention and boost their motivation, and the learners also expect this adaptation.

“Maybe it could be more interesting if we tried to link some themes to our time and the present.” Once again, this idea of modernization is being brought up.

“Not studying it using too much of an academic approach.” Here, this learner mentions the idea of art-based teaching methods, they suggest that a traditional academic approach to Shakespeare would make it less interesting.

“Study the movie adaptations along with the texts.” Once again, an idea of modernization, of changing the medium to better understand and appreciate the texts. This can also be applied to

drama, seeing the characters in the flesh as well as being able to see the context, might make for a better comprehension.

“Reading certain extracts of his writing with multiple choice questions at the end (non-graded).” This is an interesting answer because while the other ones suggested a more art-based modernized approach to the text, this learner actually points at using more traditional academic methods to assess one’s comprehension of the text. However, the fact that they insisted on the ‘non-graded’ precision could aim at the fact that grades and academic pressure might be obstacles to said comprehension. Would non-graded activities therefore be the keys to a more relaxed atmosphere of learning therefore making the learners understand and appreciate Shakespeare more?

In conclusion, this pre-experimentation questionnaire has mostly comforted my initial theory since most of the learners seemed to have never worked on Shakespeare and did not seem to be very enthusiastic at the idea. One aspect of my hypothesis has been challenged though: most learners were not particularly anxious or apprehensive, which led me to think that their lack of motivation spawned from different reasons, such as for example a lack of modernization or too academic or traditional an approach. The latter being my main theory during the experiment.

### c) The experiment

On the day of the experiment, the learners unfortunately got in late because they had an exam in their previous class, and they were quite distracted at first. They sat down and were told that this class would be a little special and linked to the questionnaire they filled in two weeks before. They were asked to get into three groups with whomever they wanted but declined, saying that they would much rather stay in their usual seats than move around. I then explained that they would have to pick a number at random and asked their ‘actual’ teacher to help me out so that it was clear that there was no bias. Once each group was assigned its task, I started giving out the extract and the assignment sheets.

The extract I had chosen was the most famous part of Romeo and Juliet, the scene of the balcony, Romeo and Juliet’s first real interaction. This scene was chosen because of its fame, I assumed that it would be easier for the student to understand it because they had probably already heard of it or seen adaptations in the past. They were given both the original version

and a modern English translation so that the language would not hinder the activities. Each group was given the same exact extract with different assignments.

### **Group 1**

The first group, or the ‘control group,’ was given the following instructions:

“GROUP 1

In pairs, read the text and answer the following questions.

1. Write down what you already know about the play. (Setting, Characters, Plot...etc)
2. Identify the vocabulary and metaphors used by Romeo to describe Juliet.
3. Guess the nature of the relationship between the two.
4. Focus on the number of times the characters talk about **names**. What is the issue? Explain it in your own words.
5. **Imagine** and write the next scene in modern English, what you think will happen to the characters.”

These questions were designed to be quite accessible and allow for a greater focus on the last question, which was the creative part of the assignment, they were designed to be tools for comprehension without taking too much of their time. They were chosen because they were similar to questions that could be found in a traditional English learning textbook and were key to understand the stakes of the extract. When asked verbally if they had ever studied or read the play, all the learners in group one answered negatively even though some of them knew the basic premises of the plot. The decision of letting work in pairs allowed the students who knew about the story help those who did not.

### **Behavior and body language**

However, the behavior and body language of group one was very obviously different from the ones of the two other groups. Quite a few of them were leaning, even slouching, onto their tables while working. The volume of the interactions was quite low, and they tended to drift off from the subject to speak about unrelated, personal topics. I had to walk over to them multiple times to make sure that they understood the assignment as well as the question, but also to ensure they were still working and not distracted. They asked fewer questions than the other groups and expressed a lot less motivation. When they got to the creative part, almost all of them were stuck and could not fulfill the assignment. Several of them told me they did not

‘possess enough imagination’ to write the next scene and most of the writings that I did get back were pretty short and followed the original story of the play.

One could theorize that straightforward academic questions may hinder the learners’ ability to be creative because it does not stimulate them in the same way as art-based approaches using drama or art.

## **Groupe 2**

The second group was the one working on drama, it was given these instructions:

“GROUP 2

In pairs, take the time to read and **understand** the extract and **act it out**.

### **PHASE 1:** Reading and Understanding

Discuss with you partner.

Try to focus on the **key words & lexical fields** and put an emphasis on them while acting.

### **PHASE 2:** Acting, Scenery

You may stand up or stay seated but make sure it is coherent with how you want to play the roles.

Try to convey the emotions of the characters as best as you can.”

This assignment was designed to stay rather vague as to not direct the learners’ performances in any certain way. The goal was to give them enough freedom in their reading comprehension as to see whether drama helped them understand and motivated them to be invested in the study of the extract. While the questions were still following a similar approach as the ones for group one, focusing on the lexical fields and working in pairs, they were still aimed at encouraging autonomy in the learners’ discovery of the text. When asked if they had already read *Romeo and Juliet*, most students answered negatively but a few of them declared having seen the modern movie adaptation *Romeo + Juliet* directed by Baz Luhrmann.

Group two’s behavior was more erratic and generally more heterogeneous than the others. The first reaction of many of the learners when told they would practice drama and act out the scene was an anxious one, some of them were straightforward in telling me that they were too shy to perform and that they did not like drama. Others asked me if they had to perform in front

of the rest of the class and when asked if they wanted to, answered that they would rather not. There was a definite tension inside of group two which was resolved by assuring them that did not have to perform in front of their classmates if they did not want to and that they did not have to stand up as long as they could put the right emphasis and act out from their seats. While I was expecting such an anxiety from high school students since their age is in general focused on their social reputation and image, I was still a little surprised by this attitude being unanimous. None of the learners wanted to perform in front of their peers, even the ones who did like drama.

However, once this initial anxiety was gone, most of the students in the group got really invested in the activity and seemed to have a good time. None of them leaned on their table, as was observed in group one, all of them sat straight and interacted with their partners. They were generally less distracted or less inclined to get off-topic than group one. The second group was also the one which asked me the most questions during the activity, especially on how to improve their pronunciation and on the rest of the play. They were definitely the most inquisitive group and most of them seemed determined to give a good performance at the end of class.

One of the learners also asked me if he could perform the scene in Old English, which was unexpected, and because his partner refused, I offered him to perform with me which he accepted. This learner also told me that not only had he read Shakespeare before, but he was also very much interested in drama and wanted to pursue it after high school.

On the other hand, when they were mostly done with the drama activity, some learners from group two asked me if they could also draw the extract, like group three. At least three different pairs told me they liked drama, but they would rather draw the extract than act it out. When asked why, they told me either that they generally liked to draw as a hobby, others told me that a “quiet” activity would be easier for them than one making them stand up, perform, and act in front of others.

### **Group 3**

Group three was the one working on the drawing activity, they were given these instructions:

“GROUP 3

In pairs, take the time to read the extract and **then** draw the scene **in the style you prefer** (comic book, manga, painting...etc)

#### PHASE 1: Reading and Understanding.

Discuss with your partner and make sure you have really understood the extract.

Find the elements you consider the most important to draw.

#### PHASE 2: Draw

Make sure to include parts of the original text **or** the modern text in your drawing.

You can **imagine** and include what happens before or after the extract in your drawing if you want.”

This assignment was divided in two phases which were meant to be assertive yet vague enough as to not guide the learners’ imagination and creative process. The aim of this activity was to let the learners as free as possible and to cut out any traditional academic approach to observe how they would behave when free of those restraints.

The behavior and body language of group three was probably the most uniform and active of the three groups. The learners of this group were definitely the most enthusiastic in the room but also the loudest ones, louder than the group working on drama. There were no students left out or who showed any signs of disinterest. There were also no complaints expressed orally during the two-hour session. In terms of body language, all the students sat straight up and were invested in the creative process. The students who did not want to draw paired up with ones that could and wanted to, and both of them were invested in the creative process. This group was also the most independent of the three, barely if at all requiring my help or asking me questions. They exhibited great enthusiasm and motivation and the atmosphere in the group was radiating throughout the classroom.

#### A safe place found through creativity

While being the most focused and less distracted group of the three, they were also the ones which took the most “space” precisely because they were so invested. While the other groups communicated at a normal volume, students of the third group sometimes raised their voices when they had a new idea, gestured more dramatically when something did not go as

they wanted, and in general, were more decisive and debated more than the others. In comparison to group two, which appeared the most shy and insecure about the activity, group three did not question or overthink their behavior in front of the rest of class. This is particularly interesting to me because it shows that the social restraints which teenagers construct and enforce on themselves can be shattered through creativity, given one can find the right angle on how to let the students express themselves. While faced with a direct assignment to speak loudly and express themselves through big dramatic gestures, students mostly express anxiety and fear of the reactions of their peers. But when given a creative assignment which does not direct them to act in front of others, they naturally express themselves theatrically and approach the text in a whole new way.

Contrary to group one, they had not been given any ‘elaborate’ comprehension questions, but those were raised by the students themselves as they were immersed in the activity. It is important to note that this autonomy increased the student’s creativity and curiosity, which was not the case in group one where the students answered the questions that were asked but did not go beyond those. The learners asked each other what certain phrases meant and how they could represent them on paper. Surprisingly, they noticed and integrated precise and minute details in the text to their creations which the other groups did not notice or comment on. For instance, such details as the metaphors of the stars, the glove and the rose were common to most drawings but were not mentioned by the other groups. This makes me wonder if the traditional approach of the comprehension questions that was assigned to group one did not restrain them too much, even though they were already quite vague and general. Would more precise question have led to a finer analysis by group one? However, the students of group three explored the text in depth without any questions. One could then theorize that rather than an issue of question, the motivation of student is the central point to a greater text analysis. When the students are stimulated by the assignment they go above and beyond what they are asked to study and notice finer details that might have been left out of a traditional assignment.

#### Autonomy as a motivating tool

These conclusions led me to take another look at the interactions between the teacher and the students from group three during this session. They were completely different and broke

out of the traditional roles that they usually embody. As mentioned before, group three was definitely the most autonomous group in the room and barely required any assistance.

This allowed for more relaxed interactions between us. Whenever I would approach the group to offer my help, the students would tell me that everything was okay but most importantly instigated a playful sense of ‘banter’, hiding their drawings so that I would not see them before the end and could have the surprise. Most of the interactions with group three were playful and on a more humorous note than with the others.

#### Different teaching methods creating different student behaviors

Two learners of group three surprised me the most, as their behavior was completely different from the other lessons I had taught them. These two girls at the back were two of the most distracted girls in the entire class group, and I would often have to intervene because they had trouble focusing and would spend the lesson chatting. Many times, I had to position myself against the wall right behind them to break up the chatter and encourage them to focus on the lesson. However, during the experiment session, they did not once get off-topic and were fully invested in the activity, perhaps even more than the rest of the group and added a lot of the more subtle details in the text to their production, leading me to think that they took the assignment seriously.

#### The problem of grading art-based teaching methods

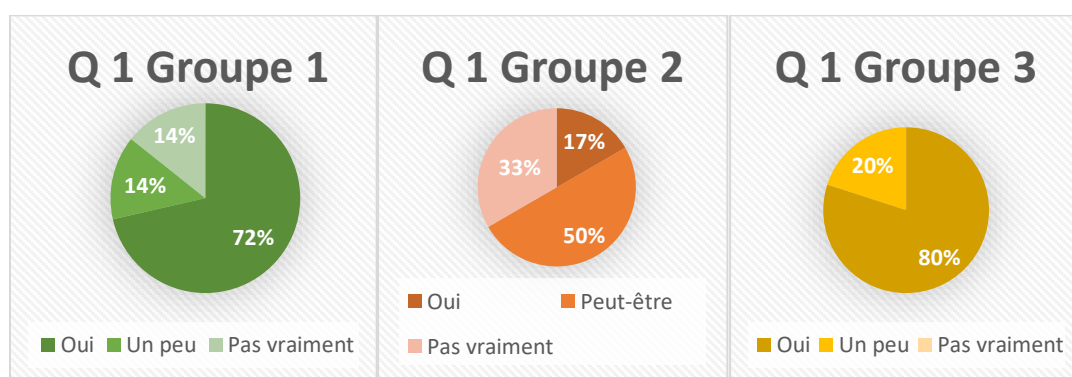
Finally, the only downside to this activity would probably be how difficult it would be to assess or grade it. Implementing a creative activity such as this one has proven to stimulate learners’ motivation but could be used too often at the risk of under-preparing students for the academic exams they will have to take in their academic cursus. It would also be extremely complicated for a teacher to grade these productions fairly, as the determination of criteria could not be objective. Therefore, the students might not be able to know their own level of English which would prevent them from trying to improve. One should then consider how these activities could be included periodically to boost students’ motivation and general morale but should not be overused or use in total replacement of a more traditional approach to teaching. Perhaps by combining written comprehension questions as well as a bonus creative question, both teachers and students might benefit; the teachers would be able to grade fairly and give feedback which would assess a student’s level, and students could be free to express themselves creatively, thus boosting their motivation to explore the document used in the assignment.



## D) Post-experiment

At the end of the session, the learners were given a post-experimentation questionnaire which included eight questions regarding the experiment. All three groups were given the exact same questionnaire as to avoid any bias in their answers. However, in the interest of the analysis of data, the number of the group was written at the bottom so that I could compare the results between group, as to see which activity the learners enjoyed the most. A discrepancy between the total number of participants and the number of answers by questions may be observed because some learners chose to circle multiple answers to some questions.

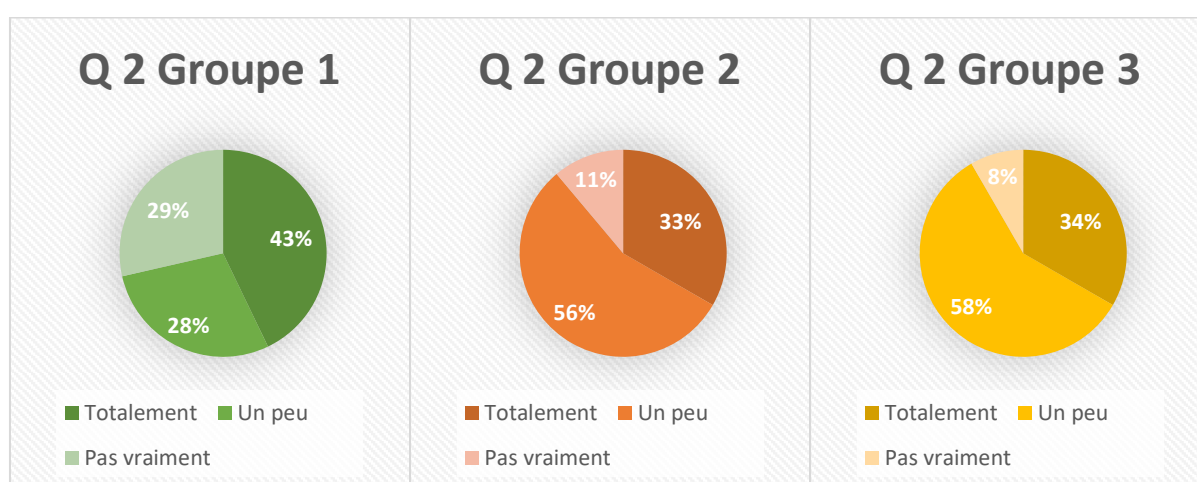
To the very first question which was a general question as to see how many learners knew about the play, an overwhelming majority of learners declared that they did know about it (17/26), only three students answered that they had not really heard about it, none declared that they had no previous knowledge of the play. However, it is interesting to note that, when looking at the results per group, all students in group three answered positively to the question (100%); most of the students in group 1 answered positively as well (72%); whereas half of the students in group two replied negatively ('not really' = 50%), with only 17% of group two answering 'yes' to question one.



### Question 2: Understanding the text

The second question aimed at measuring how well the students thought they had understood the extract. In the entire class, most students replied positively (either 'totally' or 'perhaps' = 22/26), and two students circled two answers ('perhaps' and 'not really'). No student chose to answer the question by 'Not at all.' When observing the results of each group, the results are quite interesting. Most students in groups two and three (the ones using drama and drawing) replied to the question by the answer 'totally,' 56% in group two and 58% in group three; while only 43% of the first group (the group working with the academic approach)

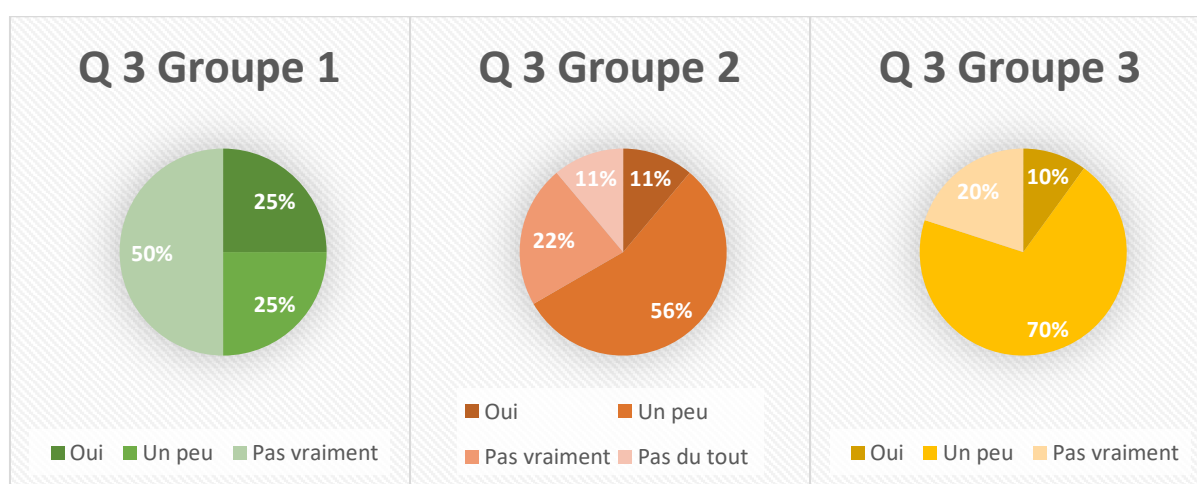
thought they had totally understood the extract. It is also crucial to note that 29% of group one answered that they did not really understand the extract, whereas this number drops to 11% in the group using drama and only 8% in the group drawing the extract. When comparing those results to question one, it is possible to note that group three might have had an advantage in understanding the extract given that most learners from this group had heard of the play before, and therefore might have known the plot of the play better, making the extract easier to understand. However, this explanation cannot be given when looking at group one and two, most learners of group one had answered ‘yes’ to the first question, while only 17% of group two had chosen this answer. It would therefore be fair to theorize a link between the two ‘art-based’ approaches and the higher rate of students declaring that they had totally understood the extract.



### Question 3: The level of difficulty as perceived by the students

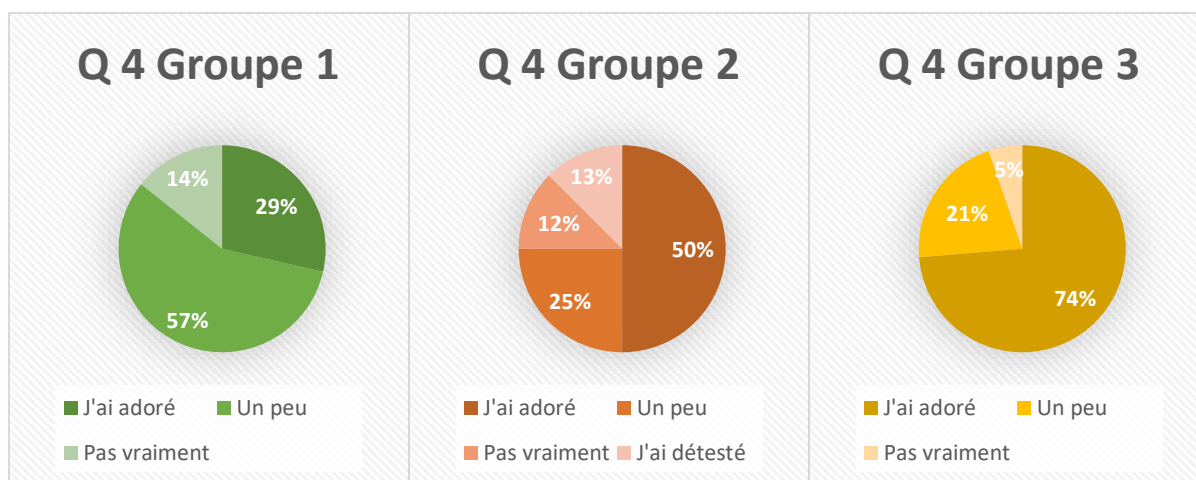
The third question on the post-experimentation questionnaire aimed at asking the learners whether they had found the extract hard to understand or not. Most students answered that they had found the extract hard to understand (either ‘yes, very hard’ or ‘a little’ = 18/26); while nine students out of twenty-six answered that they did not find the extract very hard or hard at all. Only four students found the extract very hard, and only one student found the extract very easy to understand. When looking at the results in group one, the traditional approach one, we can note that the learners are perfectly divided on the matter, 50% of the students answered rather negatively to the question (‘not really’) while 25% answered that they did find the extract hard to understand (‘yes’) and 25% said that they found the extract ‘a little’ hard to understand. No student in group one found the text ‘very easy’. In group two, the drama group, a majority of students declared that they found the extract either hard to understand

(11%) or ‘a little’ hard to understand (56%), which means that 67% of students in group two had difficulties understanding the text, while 33% of students declared that had few or not difficulties in understanding the extract. One student in group two found the text ‘very easy.’ In group number three, an overwhelming majority of learners had difficulties with the text, with 80% either declaring the text was very hard or a little hard to understand (70% ‘a little’; 10% ‘very hard’), while only 20% of the learners (which equals 2 students out of 10) said they did ‘not really’ find the extract hard to understand. No student in group three found the text very easy. The conclusion of this is that though most students in the class found the text difficult to understand, the more traditional reading-comprehension method appeared to give more direct keys for the students to understand it.



#### Question 4: General feedback and level of appreciation.

The fourth question might be the most crucial one in this experimentation, it asked the students whether or not they liked their group’s activity. This question aimed at collecting honest and direct feedback from the learners as well as to be able to see which group had liked their activity the best. This particular question raised some interrogations regarding the possibility of achieving total truthfulness out of the learners. Even though the students were reassured by the total anonymity of the questionnaires and were directly told to be completely honest in their feedback, even if it was negative. However, there is no truthful way of knowing that a learner would not feel anxious about answering negatively and upsetting the person who created the activities or answering positively to avoid that. During this experiment, everything was done as to let the students appropriate the assignments and to guide them as little as possible. The aim of this experiment is to collect earnest reactions as to draw the most objective conclusions possible.

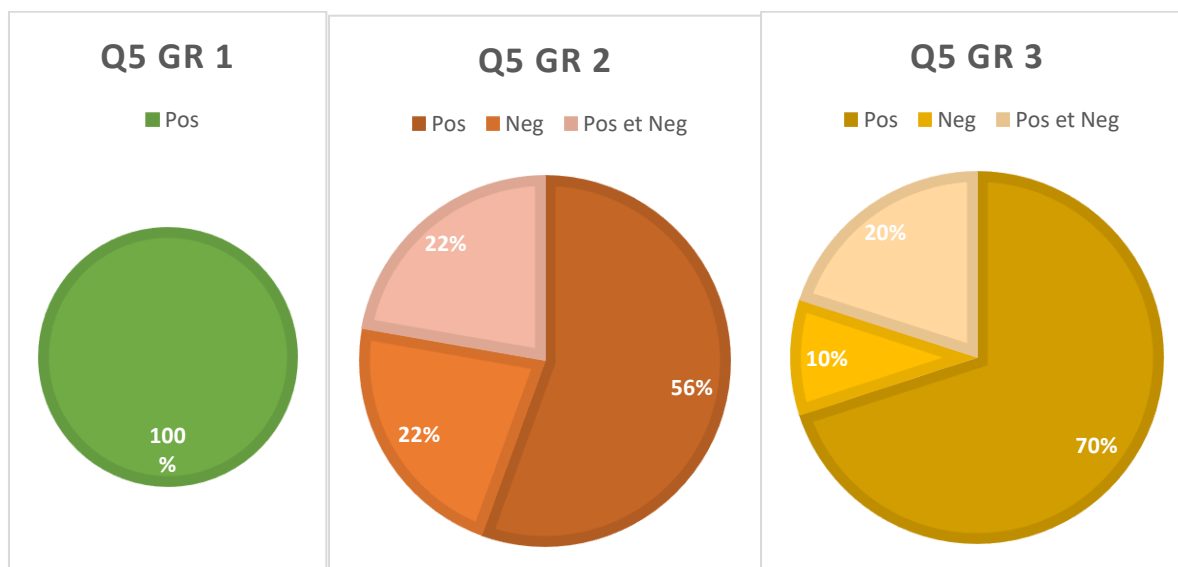


The answers to question four are fairly clear. Overall, most students in the class enjoyed the activities, with twenty students out of twenty-six answering positively to the question. In the first group, only 29% percent of students wrote that they ‘loved’ the activity (the most positive answer) while 57% declared they had like the activity ‘a little’, and 14% said they did ‘not really’ like the activity. In comparison, 74% of students in group three declared they had ‘loved’ the activity, 21% said they had liked it ‘a little’ and only 5% declared they did not ‘really’ like the activity. An overwhelming majority in group three replied with the most positive answered, with seven students out of ten having loved the activity. The results in group two were more complex, since the feedback is more divided. Generally, the learners of group two have enjoyed their activity more than group one, with 50% of them declaring they ‘loved’ it (compared to only 29% in group one) but group two is also the only group where 25% of the students (2 students out of 9) replied negatively, and the only group where one student replied with ‘I hated’ the activity. Group two is clearly the most divided group with either positive or negative extremes. We could explain this by the personal tastes and personalities of students or by the fact that this activity was the hardest to put into place since the students did not have a room for themselves to practice and act out.

#### Question 5 & 6: Detailed feedback and student opinion.

The fifth and sixth questions aimed at allowing the learners to complete their previous answer and express a more detailed feedback and point of view regarding the activity of their group. Question five gave the students with positive feedback more room to express themselves, whereas question six gave this opportunity to students with negative feedback. When

elaborating this questionnaire, I considered only leaving one general question such as ‘Why?’ but then I decided against it for two reasons. Two separate spaces would allow for an easier reading of these questionnaires as it would be easier to see the positive feedback to negative feedback ratio as well as to allow students to give more precise and organized positive and negative feedback if necessary. Only allowing one space might have confused the learners or only encouraged them to give a Manichean answer, only positive or negative. This division into two separate questions aimed at avoiding this and encouraging nuanced answers.



Overall, most students had positive feedback (19/26) while some had both positive and negative thoughts to express (4/26), and three students only expressed negative feedback. It is therefore safe to assume that most students in the class group had a positive experience of their activity. However, when looking at each group’s feedback individually, we can see that the majority of negative feedback came from group 2, with twenty-two percent negative feedback, whereas in group 3 only 10% of reviews were negative and in group 1, no student completed the negative feedback at all. This does not necessarily mean that there was no negative feedback from group 1, as can be observed with the other questions, but merely that no student decided to express their opinion in the sixth question. Most of group 2 generally only answered to question five with their positive feedback (56%) and 22% both had positive and negative feedback. In group 3, seventy percent of student only had positive feedback, twenty percent had both positive and negative feedback and only ten percent of students only had negative feedback.

## **Group 1**

Among the feedback of the first group, students only wrote positive comments:

“It was good, but I don’t have enough imagination to write the rest of the play.” This particular feedback made me question whether introducing creative activities more regularly throughout a student’s academic life might stimulate their imagination long term. Perhaps this student lacked practice in creativity. Perhaps it could also be theorized that this student might have felt freer to express their own insecurities because of the format of the experiment, would they have given a more traditional feedback in a more classic setting?

“Very interesting and allowed me to enrich my vocabulary”.

“Interesting, new vocabulary more elaborate to learn”, these two comments express the main advantages of the comprehension questions, they allow a targeted approach to vocabulary and grammar.

“I liked that we had to write because it improved our written production skill. The questions were quite hard, and they demanded a greater quality of reflection et a greater quality of work”. This comment can be linked to the importance of differentiated instruction [*“pédagogie différenciée”*] and adapting assignment levels to help bring out the best work out of a student.

“It was a creative assignment, especially question 5”. Question five asked students to imagine and write the rest of the play, it was the most creative part of the activity, and this student noticed it and appreciated it. Even in a traditional format, some students appreciate questions that allow more creativity, imagination, and freedom.

“It’s different from usual assignments: it is interactive/varied: not too complicated: interesting”. This comment surprised me since this group was working on the most ‘traditional’ activity and I expected students to be used to comprehension questions. Perhaps this particular comment referred to the experiment in itself, the division of the class into three groups doing three different activities.

The only less positive feedback was: “I would have rather done the activity of the group with the drawings, and I found my activity too academic [*‘scolaire’*] for something that is supposed to be theater. I maybe would have rather done something less formal”. This is the type of feedback I expected from more students

from group one, I expected more students from this group to resent their activity and to be envious of the other two because it would confirm my hypotheses. This student agrees that theater should be experienced through more authentic, creative, and lively activities and not just reduced to a tool to check reading comprehension.

## **Group 2**

In group 2, there were mostly positive answers such as:

“The activity was interesting; it was nice to learn the meaning of certain words and reenacting the scene”. This student experienced the two dimensions of the activity; the benefits of experiencing theater directly through reenacting and playing a role; and at the same time, the scholar side of the assignment, which is designed to help the student understand the extract and expand their vocabulary.

“It’s different from usual activities et it makes us work on oral expression”.

“Different from usual class, interactive”. These two students mostly noticed how different and unusual this activity is compared to their ‘regular’ classes. They seemed to like this different approach and may have grown weary of traditional teaching methods.

There was more divided feedback as well:

“The activity is interesting because it is creative and exchanging orally is better than usual lessons which are generally written; however, the topic was not captivating”. This is the only feedback that included both a review of the activity and of Shakespeare. This is interesting because it nuances my hypotheses since it shows that even though art-based methods can have benefits, they may not suffice to help student be more interested in literature.

“Theater yeah! But exercise a little too long”.

“The fact that it is fun [*‘ludique’*] makes working very nice. Perhaps not enough connected with English”. This comment is quite surprising to me because Shakespeare is considered to be the quintessential English poet, or at least one of the most famous and influential writers in anglophone literature. The only way I can understand this comment might be that the student may have had a hard time considering theater as a scholar

or even a learning experience.

And finally there were some negative answers:

“I found it long but mostly I do not like theater”.

“I don’t like speaking in front of other people, I don’t really like theater”.

These two answers show that perhaps a way to solve this issue could be to let the students choose which activity they would like to do.

### **Group 3**

The third group was a little less divided than group 2 and overall, mostly had positive feedback:

“Good atmosphere [*“ambiance”*], approximatively equal work. I drew very well, it was fun [*“ludique”*], it’s different from usual classes”. X2

“Good atmosphere, only 2 people out of 3 from the group actually worked. Nice activity [*“agréable”*]”.

These two answers question the group organization of the activity, I let the students work in group and chose who they worked with but perhaps I should have asked the students to work on their own for their production to be representative of each student’s work.

“It is fun [*“ludique”*], it offers us a different type of learning”. It is interesting that this student noticed and selected the less traditional aspect of their activity and made it their only feedback. The fact that multiple students used the term “*ludique*” in their feedback and generally described it as a positive thing, could hint at a greater demand than expected for more creative teaching in high school.

“This allows me to express my creativity deeply buried inside”. This student expresses some sort of relief, to finally be able to indulge in creativity, possibly implicitly meaning that more traditional classes had been preventing them from it. Perhaps they are saying that more traditional school settings deeply buried their creativity inside of them.

“Funner and more entertaining to work via drawings and still educative”.

This student perceived the two sides of the activity, the entertaining part of it which is meant to stimulate interest and motivation but also the second goal of the activity which was to learn.



Some had mixed feelings:

“It was cool. But we didn’t do much except drawing”. This student seemed to crave more traditional or formal teaching methods, they may have trouble considering creative activities as learning activities, perhaps because it was not graded or did not have formal criteria to assess one’s comprehension.

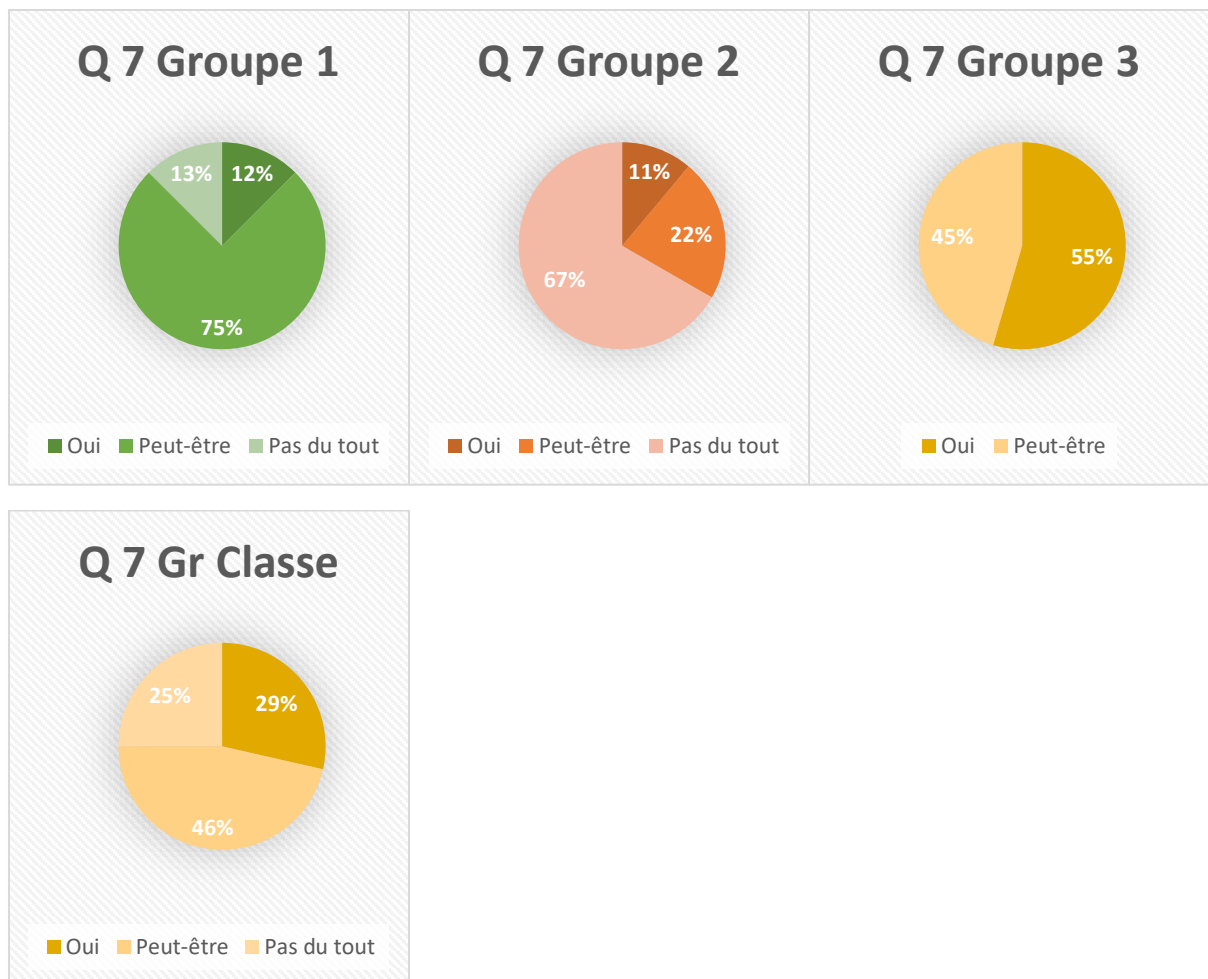
“It’s nice because it enables us to relax [*décompresser*] maybe we should do multiple lessons to alternate the activities. But I think two hours is a little too long otherwise it is a great idea, I just think we did not really study, but I really think it is a very good idea”. There is a lot to take away from this answer. First of all, it is interesting that this student found the activity to be relaxing, it might be a key to help students who are anxious at school, perhaps creative activities can be an outlet for students to feel safe and relaxed when expressing themselves. Then, the idea to reiterate the experiment and alternating the activities between the groups could be beneficial to measure how subjective the answers to the questionnaires were in this experiment and how much the statistics would vary.

Only one student wrote negative feedback:

“Drawing is not my favorite activity”. However, this is a matter of personal tastes, this might have been solved by letting the students choose their activity, however I wanted to ensure that each group were approximately equal in number to have sufficient data for the three activities and to ensure the assignment of activities be as fair as possible, which is why I drew the groups at random.

#### Question 7: opinions on William Shakespeare.

The seventh question aimed at collecting the students’ opinion of Shakespeare, which in this experiment served as a representation of classic literature in general, and whether or not they would like to work on the author again. The students had three possible answers to choose from: ‘Yes,’ ‘Perhaps,’ ‘Not at all’ as to get a maximum number of clear answers but also to give the learners a more nuanced option. Overall, most students expressed an unsure opinion, with 46% choosing the ‘perhaps’ option (thirteen students out of twenty-six), while the rest of the learners appeared to be almost perfectly divided, with eight students choosing the ‘yes’ option and seven students choosing the ‘no’ option.



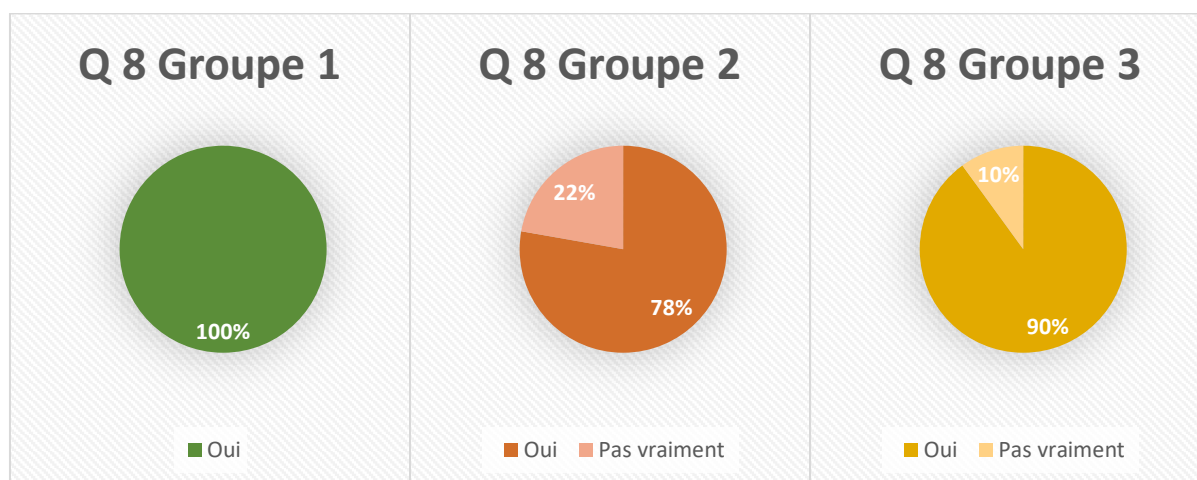
#### Question 8: would you like to do this type of activity again?

The eighth question aimed at evaluating whether or not the student groups liked their activities enough to do them again. This question gave surprising results. I was quite bewildered by the results of group one: 100% of students declared they would like to do such an activity again, that is to say, comprehension questions. But come to think of it, it seems natural that students that have been used to comprehension question since they first started learning English would not mind studying a text through them again, they probably will not have a choice because comprehension questions are the norm of written comprehension. It is also possible to infer that since this medium is the one there are most familiar with, it might be reassuring for students to experience a text this way.

Group 2 gave an overall positive response with a large majority of students (78%) saying they would like to do theater in class again, but it was still more divided than group 3, where

90% of students answered positively. Overall, group 2 has been more divided than group 3 in most of the questions, with drawing being more appreciated as a consensus than theater.

It is interesting to note that not one student replied negatively, some students were unsure but leaning towards ‘not really’ more than flat out ‘no at all.’



### E) Afterthoughts, if I were to do it all over again

The main issue that I came across during this activity was of a material nature. Unfortunately, since the students had not been informed of the activities of the session beforehand, as to not ruin the surprise to collect their initial core reactions, they did not bring any art supplies, such as colored pencils or markers, which would have allowed them to create their most elaborate works. Perhaps it was a mistake on my part and I should have predicted this and brought some art supplies myself. If I were to reiterate the experiment, I would definitely plan this aspect better. However, this group was already composed of about ten students and bringing enough art supplies for everyone would have meant a considerable number of supplies and it might result in quite a substantial budget, which would be even greater if this assignment were given to an entire class of about thirty students.

I also have quite a few regrets as to how I led the activity of group 2, I feel like given more time and maybe a second room, away from the other groups and where they could have stood up and really experienced theater, the results of the post-experimentation question would have been different. Theater can be quite challenging to work on in high school, students are scared to do something different from the others and especially when it comes to acting out or

expressing feelings. It would have been impossible to conduct this experiment in two different rooms at the same time because I think that observing the activities and the students' behavior live was a big part in measuring the level of motivation and interest of the teenagers. However, I believe that offering group 2 a safer or more private space to experiment with theater would have been beneficial.

## Conclusion

After researching such a broad issue as teaching literature in ESL (English Second Language) classes and narrowing my perspective to teaching Shakespeare in high school through artistic activities such as theater and drawing, I have reached multiple conclusions. My first hypothesis was that young students are disinterested or even reluctant to work on the classics. This was partly proven by the pre-experiment questionnaire but was surprisingly nuanced. It is impossible and would even be caricatural to paint a black and white picture; some teenagers are still widely interested in the classics and in general, with 41% of students answering 'a little' to the whether or not they wanted to study William Shakespeare. While one classroom cannot be representative of all ESL students, it is interesting to note that my first hypothesis is not a universal truth, it needs to be nuanced and rationalized.

My second hypothesis was the hardest to prove since most of my students had never worked on Shakespeare before and I could therefore not check how the subject could have been taught before. It is interesting to note that the most positive feedback on the activities came from the two art-based activities group, thus establishing that the alternative methods are efficient at fueling motivation in student groups. However, when asked whether they wished to work on Shakespeare again, the most negative answers came from the theater group which might be explained by a number of factors: social fear and peer pressure sometimes found in high school groups, lack of interest for or dislike of theater, or perhaps the lack of time and space to properly indulge in the activity.

It can be observed that introducing unorthodox activities boosted student motivation greatly. When the students find an assignment surprising or stimulating, they tend to go above and beyond what was asked of them, this can be found in the finer details of the text which were quoted, directly manipulated and interpreted by the students of group 3 who gave a central place to the metaphors of the stars, the gloves and the rose in their artistic representation of the play whereas such details were completely left out by the other groups.

This is particularly interesting to me because it shows that the social restraints which teenagers construct and enforce on themselves can be shattered through creativity, given one can find the right angle on how to let the students express themselves. Artistic activities allow the students room to experience language indirectly, through a role and the opportunity of choosing for themselves instead of being given an assignment with less responsibility and autonomy. However, comprehension questions are not to be demonized since they offer basic

comprehension entrances into the text and that high school seem to be reassured by such a stable assignment.

Art in language class is overall a great way to introduce the implicit, the hidden and the metaphorical part of a language into an otherwise mostly direct and scholar comprehension, it allows for a greater knowledge of socio-linguistic and the pragmatic context of a second language and encourages the students to express their own personal voice and choices as well as to interact with the 'other' through roles, metaphors, and safe space for expression.

## Mots-clés

Littérature classique ; corporéité ; théâtre ; dessin ; bande dessinée ; didactique ; langue vivante ; littérature jeunes adultes (YA)

## Keywords

Classical literature ; embodiment ; theater ; drawing ; comics ; pedagogy ; language class ; English second language (ESL) ; young adult literature (YA fiction) ; art-based activities

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## Annexes :

## Pre et post-experiment questionnaires

QUESTIONNAIRE SHAKESPEARE 2022

Bonjour à toi ! Etant étudiante en Master à l'université, je dois réaliser un mémoire de recherche et j'ai besoin de ton aide si tu le veux bien. Merci de bien vouloir répondre honnêtement aux questions suivantes selon tes opinions et ton expérience personnelle avec la littérature. **Entoure** ta réponse.

1. As-tu déjà entendu parler de William Shakespeare ?

Oui                  Un peu                  Pas vraiment                  Pas du tout

2. As-tu déjà travaillé sur ce sujet en classe d'anglais ?

Oui                  Un peu                  Pas vraiment                  Pas du tout

3. As-tu des craintes ou des appréhensions par rapport à ce sujet ? (Peur de ne pas comprendre ou de ne pas aimer par exemple.)

Oui (je ne me sens pas du tout à l'aise avec ce sujet)	Un peu	Pas vraiment	Pas du tout (je me sens très à l'aise avec ce sujet)
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4. Aimerais-tu travailler sur ce sujet ?

Oui                  Un peu                  Pas vraiment                  Pas du tout

5. Lirais-tu certaines des œuvres écrites par cet auteur en dehors de l'école ?

Oui                  Peut-être                  Pas vraiment                  Pas du tout

6. As-tu des commentaires ou suggestions sur le sujet ou comment le rendre plus intéressant pour toi ? (Par exemple des craintes en particulier ou même si tu adores ou détestes cet auteur et ses oeuvres.)

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QUESTIONNAIRE SHAKESPEARE 2022

1. Connaissiez-vous la pièce de théâtre étudiée avant de l'avoir vue en classe?

Oui      Un Peu      Pas vraiment      Pas du Tout

2. Pensez-vous avoir bien compris l'extrait étudié?

Totalement      Peut-être      Pas vraiment      Pas du tout

3. Avez-vous trouvé l'extrait difficile à comprendre?

Oui, très difficile      Un peu facile      Pas vraiment      Pas du tout, très facile

4. Avez-vous aimé l'activité de votre groupe?

Oui, j'ai adoré      Un peu      Pas vraiment      Pas du tout, j'ai détesté

5. Si oui, pourquoi?

6. Si non, pourquoi?

7. Aimerez-vous travailler sur Shakespeare à nouveau?

Oui      Peut-être      Pas du tout

8. Aimerez-vous faire le même genre d'activités sur d'autres sujets ou dans d'autres matières?

Oui, vraiment      Pas vraiment      Pas du tout

Groupe 1