Shakespeare-ience: interacting with 'Romeo & Juliet' story to enhance primary learners' reading skills and strategies

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Abstract

What seems to be essential in teaching reading is to guide learners toward becoming more skilled, motivated and strategic readers (Grabe, 2004). To this end, teachers need to take into account specific tools and criteria related to the determination of learners' reading needs, course design, purposeful reading lesson planning, use of motivating reading materials and meaningful activities (Anderson, 1994), learners' engagement in both higher-level and lower-level processes and provision of appropriate feedback (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). The aim of this article is to practise and reflect on the theory for the effective teaching of the reading skill to primary learners by recommending a lesson plan based on Shakespeare's play 'Romeo & Juliet' and by promoting interactive reading, that is reading as a dynamic process in which children become active readers and critical thinkers contributing their background knowledge and ideas to the reading material.

Key words: reading skills, comprehension/inferencing strategies, product, process, active/strategic reader, lower lever/higher level processes, interactive reading, motivation

Introduction

Reading is a complex literacy skill which involves several processes and promotes a variety of combinations concerning the purpose of reading, the reader's learning level, the strategies developed and the genre of the text. According to Grabe and Stoller (2011), reading can be defined as a way to draw information from a text and to form an appropriate interpretation of that information by making inferences. Vocabulary, reading fluency and motivation are central to reading skills development. Motivation, in particular, is a necessary part of reading instruction that can ensure growth in reading comprehension (Anderson, 1994; Grabe, 2004; Williams, 1986). In a similar vein, recent interactive approaches to reading give the reader a huge creative advantage focusing on the so called 'strategic' reader. In other words, there is a shift from the end product to the process, that is from reading as something static to reading as something dynamic (Calfoglou, 2004). In the light of the above, the following reading lesson recommends collaborative tasks and motivational techniques which aim to engage children in an *interactive* and *holistic* approach to reading.

Description of the reading lesson

The topic of the lesson is "Shakespeare-ience: Romeo & Juliet" and reading is its main focus aiming to help primary Ls[1] develop their reading skills and strategies by selecting to process a detailed summary of Shakespeare's play 'Romeo & Juliet' (divided into five Acts in accordance with the five Acts of the original play)[2]. Pre-, while-, post- reading activities involve both *lower-level or text-driven* (focusing on word recognition and decoding issues) and *higher-level or knowledge-driven* (focusing on the reader's contribution to the text) processes (Calfoglou, 2004) which aim to develop and practice Ls' reading skills.

More specifically, in the <u>pre-reading stage</u>[3], the use of topic-related visual stimuli (pictures of 'Romeo & Juliet', Shakespeare, his birthplace and the Globe theatre) can motivate young Ls to learn more about Shakespeare's plays, can activate their *background knowledge*, build *new background knowledge* and *create expectations* about the text to be read. A number of questions trigger Ls' *predictions* and engage them in a *guesswork* activity, especially those related to 'Romeo & Juliet' love story which stimulate young Ls' curiosity and create a mystery to be solved while reading the story.

In the <u>while-reading stage</u>, Ls are divided into pairs or groups to carry out a jigsaw reading task (*treating text as 'incomplete'*); each one of the pairs or groups is assigned with a different one of the five Acts of the story and then a representative of each group reads it aloud to the whole class (Gibson, 2008). In this way, Ls are given the opportunity to become *active readers* first of all, and then listeners (*skills integration*), in order to carry out both an *'information gap'* and *'information transfer'* activity by filling the missing information in a relevant chart about the setting, the characters involved and the main events of each one of the five Acts of 'Romeo & Juliet' story[4], thus mainly following the *TAVI* approach to reading (Johns & Davies, 1983). Then Ls are engaged in the *choral reading* of a biopoem about Romeo (the male protagonist of Shakespeare's play) to practice both their pronunciation (phonological skill - Gibson, 2008) and *comprehension strategy* by noting down information about Romeo's character and life; in this way, reading a poem is treated both *as a linguistic object (TALO)* and *as a vehicle of information* (*TAVI*).

In the <u>post-reading stage</u>, Ls try to activate their memory by stimulating immediate storage and processing mechanisms (Calfoglou, 2004) through a reading task which is a summary of 'Romeo & Juliet' story including gaps to be filled with 'cause and result' linking words ('because' and 'so') according to the plot of Shakespeare's play (*TAVI-focus on overall meaning and patterns of relationships*). In this way, *syntactic parsing* (forming structural

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[1] Ls =Learners
[2] Downloaded and adapted from www.kidsloveshakespeare.com to meet primary Ls' linguistic and cognitive level.
[3] See the reading lesson plan.
[4] See the worksheets.

units out of word sequences) and the *linguistic knowledge* of causal relationships become tools to develop and monitor Ls' linguistic and comprehension skills by forming the necessary meaning units out of word sequences as well, the so called *semantic proposition formation*. Another post-reading activity asks Ls to work with their partner(s) to carry out a lexical task in which they have to match lexical items related to 'Romeo & Juliet' story with their definitions to practice vocabulary (*TALO-text as a new vocabulary practice*). Finally, Ls are asked to speculate and think critically about Shakespeare's play by personalizing the knowledge gained from it *(inferencing strategy)* in order to talk about classical themes raised in comparison with Ls' own reality (*interactive reading)*; to this end, a 'mind-map' activity[5] (schematic mental representation in the form of a tree diagram with 'branches' to be filled in) carried out in groups triggers a whole class discussion and Ls are expected to expose their personal schemata and background knowledge on the content of the 'Romeo & Juliet' story by interacting with the meaning and ideas of the text itself (Bernhardt, 1991).

Finally, there is an attempt to combine *silent reading* (real-life reading) with *reading aloud* (either as individuals or as a chorus) to help primary Ls benefit from reading aloud in a supportive environment and learn how to match spelling with sound (Calfoglou, 2004). In the end, to provide and receive feedback, Ls are asked to fill in a self-assessment checklist[6] to realize whether and to what extent they have managed to develop their reading skills and strategies after interacting with 'Romeo & Juliet' story, that is to provide and receive feedback.

LESSON PLAN

'Shakespeare-ience: Romeo & Juliet'

Class profile:
5th or 6th Class of the State Primary School
Level: A1-A2
Time: ~ 45 min

Aim: To foster primary Ls' reading skills and strategies by familiarizing them with English drama through Shakespeare's 'Romeo & Juliet' love story.
Specific aims: 1. To develop Ls' reading skills/strategies
                    2. To activate Ls' background knowledge
                    3. To make Ls active readers
                    4. To raise Ls' critical thinking
                    5. To achieve skills integration
                    6. To enhance Ls' collaborative reading

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[5] See the worksheets.
[6] See the worksheets.

Procedure	Objectives	Time
A) <u>Pre-reading stage</u> 1. The teacher writes the names 'Romeo & Juliet' and 'Shakespeare' on the board and asks Ls relevant questions by showing relevant pictures of Shakespeare, Romeo & Juliet, the Globe theatre (sticking them on the board) to trigger a whole-class discussion, e.g. *Have you ever heard about Romeo & Juliet? Do you know who wrote this play? Have you ever been to the theatre to see a play by Shakespeare? etc.*	- To lead-in the main reading activity - To activate Ls' background knowledge - To build new background knowledge - To motivate Ls by using visual aids - To encourage Ls' guesswork & predicting skills	2 min
2. The teacher sets the context of Shakespeare's 'Romeo & Juliet' love story and triggers Ls' guesswork by narrating: ***"Once upon a time in the Italian town of Verona, Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet, the son and daughter of two families who fight each other, fall in love with each other …"*** and by asking: *How will Romeo and Juliet meet if their families are enemies? Will they lie to them? Will they meet in secret? What will happen to them? Will their love story have a happy end?"*	- To set the context of reading - To engage Ls in guesswork - To motivate Ls to read the text/story - To create expectations for the text to be read	3 min
B) <u>While-reading stage</u> 3. Ls work in pairs or groups to carry out a jigsaw reading activity to check their previous guesses/predictions; each pair/group is assigned to read silently only one of the 5 Acts of the love story summary in order to fill in a relevant chart with information about a. the setting, b. the characters & c. the main events of each Act. Then a representative of each pair/group reads	- To provide Ls with the actual reading material - To make Ls active readers - To enhance collaborative reading - To practice skills integration (reading, listening & writing)	10 min

the Act assigned to his/her pair/group aloud for the other Ls to listen in order to complete the chart with all 5 Acts (task B1, see the worksheets).		
4. The teacher reads aloud a 'biopoem' about Romeo and asks Ls to repeat as a chorus; then Ls are asked to do a gap-filling task all together both to review or practice new vocabulary and to reach a deeper understanding of the male protagonist of the love story which could help their story comprehension further as well (tasks B2 & B3, see the worksheets below).	- To practice language related to vocabulary - To enhance Ls' comprehension strategies - To encourage collaborative reading - To practice pronunciation	10 min
C) Post-reading stage 5. Ls are asked to do a gap-filling task (task C1) in pairs/groups focusing on language items (linking words of 'cause' and 'result') which express causal relationships in the specific text-summary of the play. Ls report back to the class to check their answers. Then they are asked to look at a set of 'Romeo & Juliet' pictures to find out which one of them does not fit the plot (task C3, see the worksheets).	- To make Ls focus on meaning - To enhance Ls' comprehension - To check Ls' comprehension further - To focus on grammar (cause & result words) - To engage Ls in group work - To engage Ls in a quiz for fun	5 min
6. Ls work in pairs/groups to carry out a vocabulary task related to the previous gap-filling summary of Shakespeare's love story (task C2). The teacher gives feedback along with the class.	- To practice vocabulary (words & their definitions)	5 min
7. Ls work in groups to fill-in a mind-map (tree diagram) with themes raised while reading Shakespeare's love story to trigger a class discussion by using key words from the text and asking them: e.g. *What is Shakespeare trying to say?, Is love powerful?, What other*	- To encourage critical reading - To develop critical thinking - To enhance 'interactive' reading	10 min

themes are there in Shakespeare's play?.		
8. Ls are asked to fill in a self-assessment checklist regarding 'Romeo & Juliet' reading.	- To provide & receive feedback - To help develop Ls' reading strategies	

Shakespeare's 'ROMEO & JULIET' summary* in 5 Acts

ACT I
One of the main characters is named *Romeo* Montague. Romeo is peaceful and interested more in love than in fighting. At the beginning of the play Romeo tells his cousin Benvolio and his friend Mercutio that he is sick with love for a girl who won't love him back. Benvolio and Mercutio encourage him to forget about her and go with them to a costume party at the house of Capulets. They know it will be dangerous because they are Montagues, but they think it will be fun. Old Capulet has one daughter named *Juliet*. He is hoping Juliet will agree to marry Count Paris and is excited for them to spend time together at the party. Capulet wants his party to be a happy place for love to blossom. When his nephew, Tybalt, tells him that there are Montagues at the party, Capulet demands that Tybalt leave them alone to enjoy the party. While Romeo is at the party he meets Juliet. He falls instantly in love with her but is sad to hear that she is the daughter of his family's enemy.

ACT II
Romeo decides to risk his life and sneaks to Juliet's bedroom balcony to speak with her. While he watches and listens to Juliet, Romeo learns that she is in love with him too. They speak at the window and make plans to secretly get married even though their families are enemies. The next day Romeo and Juliet go to Friar Lawrence who agrees to marry them. Friar Lawrence hopes their marriage will help to bring peace to the families.

ACT III
On the way home from the wedding Tybalt, who is still angry that the Montagues came to the Capulet party, challenges Romeo to a fight in the street. Romeo refuses to fight him. Mercutio agrees to fight Tybalt instead. Romeo tries to stop the fight and accidentally gets in the way. Tybalt stabs Mercutio and Mercutio dies. Romeo is so angry and sad that Mercutio is dead that he agrees to fight Tybalt and then kills him. Benvolio begs Romeo to run away from Verona so that the Prince of Verona can't sentence him to death.

ACT IV
Juliet is sad to hear of her cousin's death, but she is even more sad to hear that her husband Romeo must leave Verona. She has another problem, too. Her father is forcing her to marry Count Paris. She goes to Friar Lawrence for advice. Friar Lawrence gives Juliet a special type of poison. The poison will make her fall into a very deep sleep, but everyone will think she is dead. Friar Lawrence plans to send a message to Romeo so that he can come back to Verona and meet Juliet when she wakes up in her family's tomb. Then they can leave Verona and be together.

ACT V
Juliet follows her part of the plan, but something goes very wrong. Friar Lawrence's message is never sent to Romeo. Instead, Romeo hears that Juliet is dead. Romeo returns to Verona with a very strong poison. He goes to Juliet in the tomb, drinks the poison, and dies. When Juliet wakes up she finds Romeo lying next to her. She is so sad that she takes his sword and kills herself. When the Montagues and the Capulets learn what happened with their children they agree to end the years of fighting. The Prince of Verona hopes the story of Romeo and Juliet will help to keep Verona a peaceful place.

'Romeo & Juliet' Worksheets

B) <u>While-reading stage</u>:

B1. Read the text in your groups and fill in the following table as appropriate.

Shakespeare's 'Romeo & Juliet' play			
ACTS	**SETTING**	**CHARACTERS**	**MAIN EVENTS**
ACT I			
ACT II			
ACT III			
ACT IV			
ACT V			

B2. Listen to the teacher and repeat the following biopoem[7] about Romeo.

Romeo

Impetuous, kind, thoughtful, respectful

Son of Montague

Lover of peace

Who feels a desire to end the senseless conflict of his

parents, to escape with Juliet to a peaceful marriage,

to revenge his friend's death

Who needs love, peace, revenge

Who fears life without Juliet, banishment,

Who gives a promise to be faithful, his life, a reason

to forgive

Who would like to see Capulets and Montagues

together, friendships renewed, lives preserved

Resident of Verona

Montague

B3. Do the following task based on the previous biopoem about Romeo.

First name _____

Four traits that describe character _____

Relative (brother, sister, daughter, etc.) of _____

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[7] By Anderson (2002) retrieved from http://novelinks.org/uploads/Novels/RomeoAndJuliet/Biopoem.pdf

Lover of _____

Who feels _____

Who needs _____

Who fears _____

Who gives _____

Who would like to see _____

Resident of _____

Last Name _____

C) Post-reading stage[8]:

C1. Complete the following text with "so" and "because" to make up the summary of 'Romeo & Juliet' love story.

One night a young man met a girl at a party, and they fell in love at first sight. That night he went to her house, 1 _____ he wanted to see her again. He was afraid to go in 2 _____ he waited under the balcony until she appeared. They spent the night together, and the next day they got married. Their marriage had to be a secret 3 _____ their families were enemies. The following day, the man had a fight with his wife's cousin and killed him 4 _____ he had to leave the city. The girl was desperate 5 _____ she wanted to be with her husband. 6 _____ she made a plan. She decided to take a drug and pretend to be dead, and later, when she woke up, she planned to escape from the family tomb and run away with her husband. Then she sent a message to her husband, and took the drug. But her husband didn't get the message 7 _____ the messenger couldn't find him. When the man heard that his wife was "dead" he hurried to her tomb. He thought she really was dead 8 _____ he killed himself. When the girl woke up, she saw her husband was dead 9 _____ she killed herself, too. Finally, 10 _____ both their children were dead, the two families made peace.

C2. Match the following words with their definitions. One example is given.

peace   secret   tomb   messenger   pretend   desperate   enemy   cousin

1 a person who carries a message: _____

2 something you don't want other people to know: _____

3 an underground room for dead people: _____

4 make someone think something is true when it isn't: _____
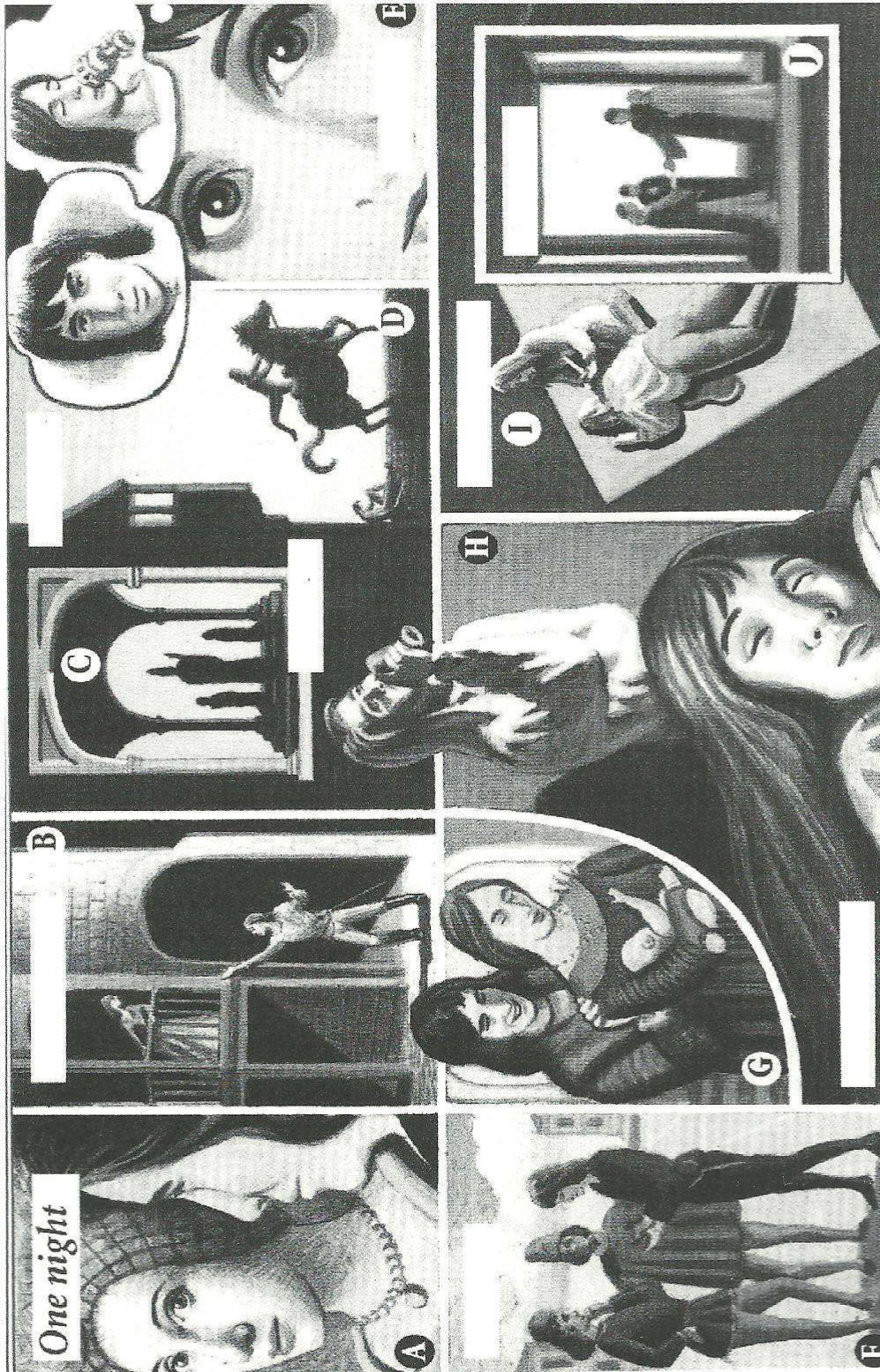
5 the opposite of *friend*: _____

_____

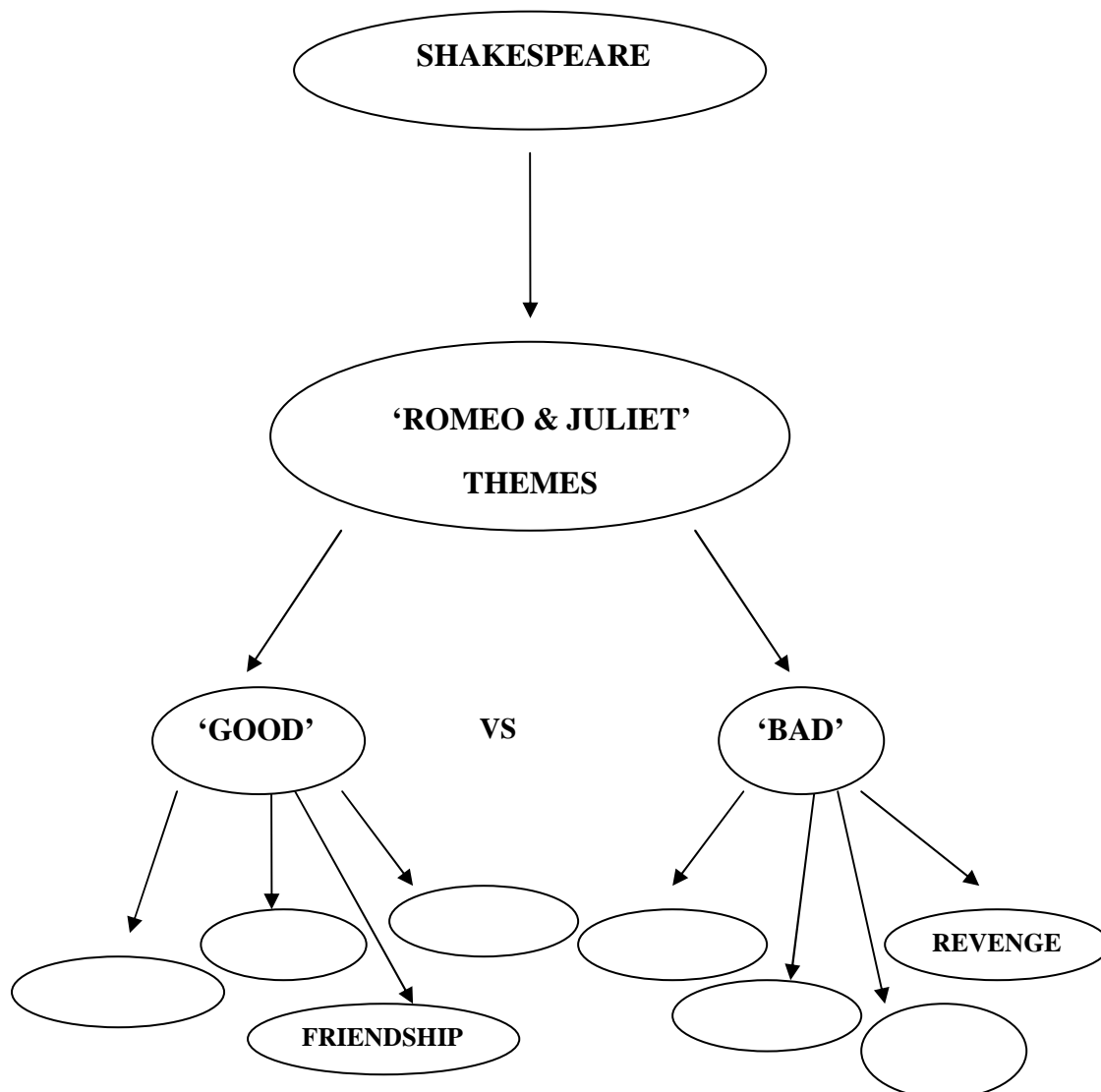6 ready to do anything to change a situation: ____*DESPERATE*____

7 your uncle's or aunt's child: _____

8 the opposite of *war*: _____

C3. Work with your partner. Which one of the following pictures does not fit 'Romeo & Juliet' plot?

C4. Work in groups and think how to fill in the following tree diagram with themes raised while reading Shakespeare's 'Romeo & Juliet' as in the examples.

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              ┌─────────────────┐
              │   SHAKESPEARE   │
              └────────┬────────┘
                       │
                       ▼
              ┌─────────────────┐
              │'ROMEO & JULIET' │
              │     THEMES      │
              └─────────────────┘
             /                   \
            ▼                     ▼
       ┌─────────┐   VS      ┌─────────┐
       │ 'GOOD'  │           │  'BAD'  │
       └─────────┘           └─────────┘
```

'GOOD' branches to: ( ), ( ), ( ), FRIENDSHIP

'BAD' branches to: ( ), ( ), REVENGE, ( )

SELF-ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST
Tick √ what's true for you

Now I can:	
read a text silently	
look for specific information in a text	
guess the meaning of a new word from the context	
read for general understanding	
imagine what is coming next while reading a story	
get a good understanding of parts of the text	
talk about Shakespeare's 'Romeo & Juliet'	
work with the setting of a story/play	
work with the main events of a story/play	

work with the characters of a story/play	
read and understand a poem	
make predictions and check them	
think of the main ideas/themes of a play/story	
work well with my classmates	

Conclusion

Reading is the main focus of the lesson aiming to help primary Ls develop their reading skills and strategies by selecting to process a detailed and adapted summary of Shakespeare's play 'Romeo & Juliet'. The summary is divided into five Acts in accordance with the five Acts of the original play[9] after taking into consideration primary Ls' actual linguistic and cognitive needs, different reading styles, their overall competence and age in order to make the story as comprehensible and appropriate as possible for children.

The authentic-like nature of the text selected (a popular love story, very high in primary Ls' interest as it resembles to fairy tales), its narrative form, its classical topic and themes can help promote primary Ls' *holistic* approach to the reading material. Moreover, the lesson plan recommended includes a variety of *collaborative* activities and techniques which a. attract primary Ls' attention by creating expectations about the text to be read in a motivating and learner-centered way (e.g. visual materials, predictions/guesswork), b. give them the opportunity to be *active readers*, confirm their predictions, clarify comprehension and guess new word meanings through a wide range of group activities related to 'Romeo & Juliet' story (e.g. jigsaw & collaborative reading, information gap/transfer task, choral biopoem reading), c. make them retrieve the knowledge gained through reading of and *interaction* with the 'Romeo & Juliet' text and d. apply it in a different way, in order to develop awareness of schema modification, 'critical' thinking and *metacognition* out of Shakespeare's play (Grabe, 1991; Calfoglou, 2004). In this way, the reading of the popular 'Romeo & Juliet' story can help to achieve primary Ls' high *motivation* (Anderson, 1994; Calfoglou, 2004; Grabe, 2004) and enable them to succeed in inferencing and thus comprehending the main themes of Shakespeare's play at the end through the schematic mental representation of 'Romeo & Juliet' themes.

Last but not least, reflecting upon aspects of one's reading instruction can help develop a keener understanding of reading and improve one's current instructional techniques. It can also help to enhance the quality of learning taking place when teaching reading to children through their actual engagement in both higher-level and lower-level processes and the provision of appropriate feedback (Grabe & Stoller, 2011).

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[9] Downloaded and adapted from www.kidsloveshakespeare.com to meet E' primary class Ls' L2 level.

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