

"You Taught Me Language"



Learning a new language is usually seen as acquiring a new skill, which might enable the student to broaden their mind as well as their ability to communicate around the world. In *The Tempest*, however, Caliban's experience of being taught English by Miranda and Prospero is closely tied to his experience of being subjugated to Prospero's will. In his first scene in the play he says that his only profit on learning to speak was that he now knows how to curse, and he indeed goes on to curse Prospero for taking over the island from him and for keeping him enslaved. However, although learning English here is connected to feelings of powerlessness and oppression, Caliban is also able to use his language skills to question the status quo (plus he speaks the most beautiful poetry when he describes his home island to Stephano and Trinculo in Act 3, Scene 2).



Assign roles and read the passage below out loud. Pay particular attention to the emotional development of the characters in this extract: are there moments when the mood changes, or when things become more heated?

Prospero. Shake it off. Come on;
We'll visit Caliban my slave, who never
Yields us kind answer.

Miranda. 'Tis a villain, sir,
I do not love to look on.

Prospero. But, as 'tis,
We cannot miss him: he does make our fire,
Fetch in our wood and serves in offices
That profit us. What, ho! slave! Caliban!
Thou earth, thou! speak.

Caliban. [*Within*] There's wood enough within.

Prospero. Come forth, I say! there's other business for thee:
Come, thou tortoise! when?
[...] Thou poisonous slave, got by the devil himself
Upon thy wicked dam, come forth!

[Enter CALIBAN]

Caliban. As wicked dew as e'er my mother brushed
With raven's feather from unwholesome fen
Drop on you both! a south-west blow on ye
And blister you all o'er!

Prospero. For this, be sure, tonight thou shalt have cramps,
Side stitches that shall pen thy breath up; urchins
Shall, for that vast of night that they may work,
All exercise on thee; thou shalt be pinched
As thick as honeycomb, each pinch more stinging
Than bees that made 'em.

Caliban. I must eat my dinner.
This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou takest from me. When thou camest first,
Thou strokedst me and madest much of me, wouldst give me
Water with berries in't, and teach me how
To name the bigger light, and how the less,
That burn by day and night: and then I loved thee
And showed thee all the qualities o' the isle,
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile:
Cursed be I that did so! All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!
For I am all the subjects that you have,
Which first was mine own king: and here you sty me
In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
The rest o' the island.

Prospero. Thou most lying slave,
Whom stripes may move, not kindness! I have used thee,
Filth as thou art, with human care, and lodged thee
In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate
The honour of my child.

Caliban. O ho, O ho! would't had been done!
Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else
This isle with Calibans.

Miranda. Abhorred slave,
Which any print of goodness wilt not take,
Being capable of all ill! I pitied thee,
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
One thing or other: when thou didst not, savage,
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes
With words that made them known. But thy vile race,
Though thou didst learn, had that in't which good natures
Could not abide to be with; therefore wast thou
Deservedly confined into this rock,
Who hadst deserved more than a prison.

Caliban. You taught me language; and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language!



Discuss within your group how and why Prospero and Miranda teaching Caliban to speak their language turned from an act of charity or civilisation to oppression?



Do you think there might have been a way to avoid this escalation of the conflict?



Why did you think Caliban did not teach Miranda and Prospero his language?



Team up with a student who speaks a different language to you and learn some of the words Caliban learned from Miranda in their language. Finish this by learning a blessing rather than a curse in your new language.

the bigger light, that burns by day	the lesser light that burns by night
the tiny lights in the sky at night	the white things one can see in the sky during the day

A blessing:

