Old English in Switzerland: Guidelines for Teachers

Introduction

Today, English is omnipresent in Switzerland – indeed, it is sometimes referred to as the fifth national language alongside German, French, Italian and Romansch. However, only few people know that English is attested in Switzerland already in the early Middle Ages: Monks in monasteries copied Old English texts, some of which survive until this day. We don't know if English was used much as a spoken language. The surviving bits and pieces of Old English occur in the context of Latin works and were probably copied from earlier manuscripts. The scribes perhaps did not always understand the Old English passages. Occasionally, they adjusted the language to Old High German, which must have been their first language. Still, the material provides very interesting insights into multilingualism in Switzerland in the early Middle Ages. This set of teaching materials presents some of the Old English texts transmitted in Swiss libraries and introduces the students to their cultural background through a set of texts and exercises. The texts and exercises are all in English and intended for Gymnasium students. As some of the vocabulary involved is not core lexis, the level required for the readings is B2. However, many of the tasks should also be feasible for B1 students, as the words under discussion have links to both Modern English and Modern German.

Teaching materials

The first group of materials consists of five texts (each approximately 450-650 words in length), which introduce the following set of topics:

- A. The Venerable Bede: Anglo-Saxon monk, poet, historian and innovator
- B. The Anglo-Saxon missionaries: spreading Christianity among the Germanic tribes
- C. Producing manuscripts in the Anglo-Saxon period
- D. The languages of Early Medieval Britain
- E. The Anglo-Saxons: the native speakers of Old English

All texts are followed by comprehension questions (model answers are included at the end of this document). Teachers can select the texts and topics most relevant for their classes. The texts can also be assigned to separate groups of students, which can afterwards share the information that they have gathered with their classmates, for example, in the shape of a group puzzle.

The second group of materials consists of worksheets with activities and questions. Each set of exercises centres around one of the Old English sources preserved in the Abbey Library of St Gallen. They are linked to some of the topics introduced in the five texts but can also be used independently (and in any given order).

- I. Old English and Old High German bird names (< Text B and/ or D)
- II. Old English names of the months (< Text A and/ or C)
- III. Anglo-Saxon runes (< Text C)
- IV. Bede's Death Song (< Text A)

Set I focuses on Old English and Old High German names of birds (and some other animals), which are transmitted in glossaries on the biblical book of Leviticus, the third book of the Old Testament, which, in chapter 11, includes lists of "clean" and "unclean" animals according to the dietary laws of

the Israelites. People living in North-Western Europe during the Middle Ages would have struggled with this passage. In Anglo-Saxon England, the bible text was studied in the late seventh century at the Canterbury School of Theodore and Hadrian. The glossaries contain Old English translations of difficult biblical vocabulary and were also popular in Old High German-speaking areas on the Continent, where they were copied and gradually translated into Old High German. Native speakers of German will be able to recognize many Old English words due to their similarities to German.

Set II includes activities linked to the Old English names of the months. The source is a work by the Venerable Bede (introduced in Text A), an important scholar and writer who lived in Northumbria in the North of England during the first half of the 8th century. The work is *De temporum ratione* ('On the reckoning of time'), which deals with calendar calculations. When discussing the months of the Greeks and the Romans, Bede also includes the Old English names of the months. Interestingly, there are only 10 different months; their names are linked to agriculture, the changing seasons, and to Germanic lore. J.R.R. Tolkien used the names of the months for the "Shire Reckoning" in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

Set III focuses on the runic script used by the Anglo-Saxons. As such, the activities are linked to Text C, which deals with book production and writing systems. Anglo-Saxon runes are distinct from continental "South Germanic" runes. Many aspects of the script are still a secret!

Set IV focuses on Bede's *Death Song*, a short Old English poem, which the Venerable Bede (see Text A) composed shortly before his death in AD 735. The poem presents a reflection on life and death. The earliest surviving version of this poem is transmitted in a manuscript from St. Gallen!

Answers to all sets are included at the end of each file.

Classroom contexts

Old English is not necessarily a topic included in the EFL classroom. However, in the German-speaking parts of Switzerland, pupils can draw on their knowledge of German to access Old English relatively easily. As such, talking about Old English can help pupils understand the links between German and English (as well as other Germanic languages) more easily. We envisage that many of the activities would also make sense in a discussion of old and new media, the history of writing, etc. There are obvious links to other school subjects, notably, history and Latin.

Field trip to St Gallen

The texts and activities can be uses as stand-alone resources in the classroom. However, we encourage teachers to take their classes on a trip to the Abbey Library of St. Gallen, UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site since 1983, and the place in which most of the Old English texts preserved in Switzerland are located. There are three exhibition spaces in the Abbey District: the Abbey Archives, the vaulted cellar of the Abbey and, finally, the unique baroque Abbey Library itself. The exhibition in the Abbey Archives introduces the famous architectural plan in a visitor-friendly manner; it illustrates book production with activities and objects suited for students and highlights the significance of the record keeping at the Abbey in the early Middle Ages. In the vaulted cellar, some of the most precious manuscripts are on display.

For further details see:
https://www.stiftsbezirk.ch/en/visitor-tip

https://www.stiftsbezirk.ch/en/how-to-get-here

Other things to do in St Gallen:
Visit the Cathedral:
https://www.schweizmobil.ch/de/wanderland/services/sehenswuerdigkeiten/sehenswuerdigkeit-0270.html

Walk through the old town:
https://www.schweizmobil.ch/de/wanderland/services/sehenswuerdigkeiten/sehenswuerdigkeit-0306.html

Go for a hike along the Panoramaweg, for example, from Mühlegg past Drei Weihern to St Georgen:
https://www.schweizmobil.ch/de/wanderland/routen/route-0970.html

Resources on the history of the English language / Anglo-Saxon culture

Bosworth & Toller, Anglo-Saxon Dictionary: https://bosworthtoller.com/

Digital facsimiles of manuscripts in Swiss libraries: https://www.e-codices.ch/en

Background on Early Germanic calendars:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_Germanic_calendars

History of English in 10 Minutes: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3r9bOkYW9s

An in-depth but highly readable account of the history of English: David Crystal, *The Story of English* (2004)

Watch the movie *The Dig* (starring Carey Mulligan and Ralph Fiennes) on the excavation of the Sutton Hoo ship burial https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Dig_(2021_film)

Feedback

If you spot any mistakes or would like to share your experiences using our teaching materials, please get in touch. Any feedback is highly appreciated!

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Model answers to discussion questions (Texts A-E)

A. The Venerable Bede: Anglo-Saxon monk, poet, historian and innovator

    (1) What did Bede do in his lifetime which has meant he is still remembered over 1200 years after his death?

    The Venerable Bede is known for being a significant writer of the Anglo-Saxon era, with 44 works to his name, but particularly for writing the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* and his *Death Song*. He also created pioneering methodology, including introducing the concept of notes to cite authors. Additionally, he sought greater understanding of the bible, challenged traditional beliefs by others in the religious community and attempted to reform the church by fighting against abuses of power and the exhortation of the poor.

    (2) What was special about Bede's most famous works – the *Ecclesiastical History* and *Bede's Death Song*?

    The *Ecclesiastical History* detailed factual information about significant historical events including Anglo Saxon England's conversion to Christianity. It is regarded as the most important historical source for the early Anglo-Saxon period.

    Bede's Death Song is a 5-line poem speaking about the thoughts of a dying man and is said to have been spoken by Bede on his death bed. It is unknown if Bede wrote it or not, but it is attributed to him.

    (3) Discussion question: Why do you think that nuns and monks were often some of the most educated in society and what sacrifices did they have to make?

    Nuns and monks were often brought into the clergy at a young age and then would spend their time involved in religious activities but also in studying and teaching. Monks and nuns committed their lives to the church, giving them the security of accommodation, work and provisions. This also provided the possibility to devote far greater time than the majority of people in society to reading and education. However, they had to make a life-long commitment to follow the strict rules of the church and to lead an ascetic lifestyle.

B. The Anglo-Saxon missionaries: spreading Christianity among the Germanic tribes

    (4) The Anglo-Saxons successfully converted Frisia and other parts of mainland Europe, established multiple monasteries and continued to spread the Christian religion in Europe by keeping those monasteries under the control of Anglo-Saxon monks.

    (5) Anglo-Saxon monks travelled throughout Europe and were even invited to be scholars at the court of important European kings. They brought Old English documents with them and from time to time included Old English in the new texts they wrote.

    (6) There are multiple reasons why the Anglo-Saxons converted the continental Germanic peoples. Rome and the pope did not yet yield the influence of later periods. The Anglo-Saxons had previous trade connections with Frisia and the Frankish Empire. The Frankish Empire was not the most stable at the time and benefitted from Anglo-Saxon involvement and thus encouraged it.

C. Producing manuscripts in the Anglo-Saxon period

    (1) Why did paper replace papyrus and parchment? Which writing materials did people use in the past? What advantages/disadvantages did they have?

- Paper replaced the other two because it soon became cheaper and more obtainable. Moreover, papyrus breaks easily when folded and is very sensitive to temperature and humidity.
- Texts on parchment could be erased and re-written. However, parchment is very expensive as it is made of animal skins.
- Black or brown ink was used for the main body of a manuscript. Red ink was used for headings (*rubrics*), initials or other important passages. Purple, gold, and silver ink were reserved for luxurious manuscripts.
- In Antiquity, scribes wrote with reed pens (*calamus*); in the Middle Ages, the quill was the most popular writing tool. Steel nibs were only invented in the 18th century.

(2) What is the advantage of a minuscule script?

- The letters are often connected by bows. Ligatures (two joined letters) are very common. Because the pen does not have to be lifted so often, one can write faster.

(3) The etymological link between the words *book* and *beech* points to the early use of beechwood tablets, on which runes were inscribed. (Note: the English verb *write* is linked to German *ritzen*)

D. The languages of Early Medieval Britain
   (1) What languages were spoken in Britain in the early Middle Ages? Explain how they arrived there. The inhabitants of the British Isles originally spoke Celtic languages. When Britain became part of the Roman Empire, Latin was introduced. The Anglo-Saxon invasion in the 5th century brought the language that would become English, which consisted of several West Germanic dialects. Later, the Viking invasion resulted in Scandinavian languages being spoken in the British Isles (esp. in the North and East). The Norman Conquest of England, which took place in 1066, resulted in French being introduced to England.
   (2) Languages change in terms of pronunciation, e.g. Old English halig became holy, and mus became mouse. Languages also change because the speakers "borrow" words from other languages. English has extensively borrowed from Latin, Old Norse and, later on, French.

E. The Anglo-Saxons: the native speakers of Old English
   (1) Who were the Anglo-Saxons and where did they come from? The term Anglo-Saxons refers to a group of Germanic tribes (including Angles, Saxons, Jutes and probably Frisians) who migrated from Southern Denmark / Northern Germany to Britain during the second half of the 5th century AD.
   (2) Which important events shaped the Anglo-Saxo period? Important events of the Anglo-Saxon period are the Viking invasion, which started in the 9th century, the establishment of the Danelaw, and the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, which resulted in the end of Anglo-Saxon England.
   (3) What were some of the cultural achievements of the Anglo-Saxons? The Anglo-Saxons were great poets and metalworkers.
   (4) What uses did an Anglo-Saxon king have for an ornamental helmet, such as the Sutton Hoo Helmet? The helmet would have provided protection in battle and it would have enhanced or highlighted the social status of its wearer.