

Look at Bunyan, Defoe and Coleridge- that'll learn you

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William Shakespeare was "a master of English"; and he is "widely regarded as the greatest writer in the history of the English language". So it's interesting for us here in Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire to look at his English grammar.

Look at what he wrote in one of his most famous plays, *As You Like It*, where Rosalind says: "You must not learn me how to remember". He has a similar usage in *The Tempest*, where Caliban declares: "The red-plague rid you for learning me your language". And in *Troilus and Cressida*, Ajax commands: "Learn me the proclamation!"

This is interesting for us because, these days, if a Norfolk dialect speaker uses the verb learn in this way they are likely to be told that it is 'wrong'. Not "learn me how to remember", schoolteachers might instruct, but "TEACH me how to remember". Publishers and editors will say the same thing: it's 'wrong' to write about learning somebody something.

Now it's obviously true that learn is not used in this way in modern Standard English. But what exactly is wrong about it? Some people argue that it's wrong since you are muddling



■ According to older forms of English, these pupils might say: "Learn me some facts." Picture: PA

up two different concepts.

But in Norwegian the verb "å lære" means both to learn and to teach. The same situation occurs in many other languages, and nobody gets confused. Nor do we in Norfolk, or the many other dialect areas where learn is used in this way: you can learn something from somebody or you can learn somebody something. The grammar makes it clear what is meant.

In our dialect we preserve an older form of the English language, where teach just meant 'to demonstrate': teach has the same historical root as the modern German verb zeigen 'to show'. The current situation in Standard English, where you

can only learn something FROM somebody and you have to TEACH somebody something, is relatively new.

John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, wrote: "my Father might learn me to speak". In *Robinson Crusoe*, Daniel Defoe used the phrase: "having learned him English". And as recently as 1801, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, we find the sentence: "They learn us to associate a keen and deep feeling with all the good old phrases".

In Norfolk, many people are still happy to follow Shakespeare and Coleridge and use good old phrases like "that'll learn 'em".