

Making Macbeth accessible to deaf learners

Angie Wootten, Dr Abigail Rokison-Woodall and Dr Tracy Irish give a detailed insight as to how they have provided access to Shakespeare's Macbeth for deaf learners instead of deaf learners access to Shakespeare's Macbeth

The opening lines of Shakespeare's Macbeth are well known:

*When shall we three meet again?
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?*

So far so easily understood, but as we progress through the scenes of murder and madness the language quickly becomes less familiar and we encounter a range of literary devices, including personification, metaphor and alliteration, used to powerful effect. However, this sophistication of language presents challenges for those of us asked to support the deaf learner 'tackling Shakespeare'. Engaging with Shakespeare is a mandatory element of the National Curriculum and so the main question that arises is:

How can the deaf learner gain access to the world of Shakespeare?

Additionally:

Are there benefits to social and cognitive development for the deaf child, offered by Shakespeare's characters and plot?

Does Sign bring something extra to Shakespeare?

The background to the project

The body of research relating to drama and deaf children and, in particular, the teaching of Shakespeare to deaf children is extremely slender. In the 1980s there are glimpses in the literature of practitioners 'having a hunch' that using drama (particularly role play) as a tool with deaf children might be effective because of drama's inherent qualities; the use of the body, expression and gesture (Cayton, 1981; Seeley and Camus, 1983). Very little has been written since.

In 2017, we began a project, under the umbrella of the

collaboration between the University of Birmingham (UoB) and The Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) to explore ways of teaching Shakespeare to deaf children using the sorts of 'rehearsal-room pedagogy' developed and disseminated by the RSC. RSC 'rehearsal-room pedagogy' is a way of teaching Shakespeare based on the activities and thinking that actors do in a rehearsal room. Increasing evidence suggests that these methods help to build confidence and resilience, raise aspirations and attainment, and foster a positive attitude towards the study of Shakespeare in young people (RSC website), but could such methods be adapted or expanded to include and benefit deaf students using a range of communication methods? We approached two schools for the deaf: Braidwood school in Birmingham, and Mary Hare school in Newbury, and with teachers from both schools, assessed some of the exercises in the RSC Toolkit (RSC, 2010) for challenges for deaf students. There were obvious issues, for instance exercises that instruct learners to close their eyes and respond to sound cues. Many of the exercises also assume the ability to read a piece of text aloud, individually or in unison.

In thinking about the benefits for deaf young people of rehearsal room pedagogy, we became particularly interested in Theory of Mind (ToM), and were guided by the work of Helen Chilton (Chilton, 2017; Chilton et al, 2019). Theory of Mind – the recognition and naming of thoughts and feelings – seems to relate naturally to plays, plots and characters. Indeed, the very act of taking part in drama activities may help develop ToM; to inhabit the character of Macbeth is to consider how Macbeth's thoughts and feelings may be both similar and different from your own. Shakespeare's plays also contain dramatic irony, where, for example a character voices one thing to another character but tells the audience something quite different. The levels of ToM needed to understand a play like Macbeth are thus quite complex.

Research and development

In August 2018, we undertook a week of Research and Development (R&D) with deaf actor Stephen Collins, sign language interpreter Becky Barry and RSC practitioner Kat Fletcher. The aim for the week was to create workshop activities that were accessible to deaf children using oral/aural communication and those predominantly using sign language. Subsequently we trialled these



workshops with students from Braidwood and Mary Hare. Whilst we had initially thought that the activities for each group might be quite different, it became increasingly apparent that all children could benefit from exercises that reinforce with visual stimuli and involve the use of the whole body in communication.

We set out to develop materials guided by pedagogical principles already familiar to Teachers of the Deaf:

1. Appeal to the visual sense
2. Keep attention and interest and establish understanding quickly
3. Reduce cognitive overload
4. Learn by doing
5. Establish 'the known' and build on it

Learning by doing, a standard pedagogic principle for QToDs, dovetails neatly with rehearsal room pedagogy. Its efficacy is explained by the concept of embodied cognition, our increasing scientific understanding of how we think through our bodies, constantly processing aspects of our surroundings through every aspect of our sensory contact. This process allows us to unconsciously but constantly readjust our personal mental schema of reality. Our understanding is personal because it is filtered through the myriad previous sensory perceptions that have formed our experiences. Michael Trimble, a neuroscientist, explains how 'truth' is 'not some independent unconditioned universal but is inextricably entwined with the life and experiences of the living individual and the world he or she has constructed' (Trimble, 2007, p.205). Language, verbal and non-verbal, is how we share this embodied cognition of the world with others. Members of the Deaf Community could be said to be more connected with their bodies and so can teach oral/aural people much about embodied cognition in practice, or what RSC Voice Director Cicely Berry called 'the physicality of language'.

This understanding of how cognition builds experientially (that young learners are not empty vessels waiting to be filled, but living breathing crucibles of perception and experiences) extends the established Vygotskian principle of building on new knowledge and skills to old, within the proximal zone of the child. Learners are constantly updating their own personal mental schema of the world built on their own experiences and perceptions, and learning to negotiate meaning with those around them.

One of the highlights of the R&D was seeing the deaf theatre practitioners and sign language interpreters sign the first scene from Macbeth, in BSL, SSE and a highly physical theatrical form called Visual Vernacular (VV) which combines iconic BSL signs, facial expression, movement and gesture. The importance of deaf young people being able to see key Shakespearean scenes in their own first language – both in terms of seeing themselves represented on stage, and reinforcing the idea that Shakespeare is for them – became clear. Having a scene performed in this way also modeled how the students could own the text for themselves, bringing their own creative understanding



to interpreting Shakespeare's language. We commissioned a film of this first scene for use in the workshops. The students were captivated by seeing deaf actors perform the scene in different ways, and had no difficulty picking up the idea of creating their own 'versions' of the scene. Some adopted signs or gestures directly from the film. Others invented their own ways of communicating Shakespeare's language. The process of finding signs for the line 'fair is foul and foul is fair', a line all too easily chanted without great thought, for example, led to a discussion of the deliberate ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning inherent in these words. Some signed 'fair' as 'beautiful', some as 'just', some signed 'foul' as 'ugly' or 'disgusting' some as a transgression in football.

Plans to make a similar film of the witches' prophecies in Act One scene 3 faltered, so instead we settled on using a clip from the existing 'live broadcast' film of the recent RSC stage production, in a version with subtitles and a BSL interpreter signing in a corner of the screen. When we showed this to the Braidwood students it quickly became apparent that the (very dark) action, with subtitles and signing that was fast and sophisticated, transgressed our principle of avoiding cognitive overload and we lost their attention. Their disconnection to this film was in marked contrast to the attention and enjoyment they had shown to the specially created film. It was an important moment for us, not only in reinforcing the issues around cognitive overload, but also in supporting our understanding of the value of deaf actors performing for deaf students.

The principles set out above served us well. Elsewhere in the workshops we had sought to ease the cognitive processing aspect by, for example, displaying instructions and questions on screen and using props, such as sashes and crowns for signifiers of character that also chart the transfer of power from one person to another. We used powerpoint images to reinforce the visual sense of location: a picture of a heath for the first scene, maps showing Scotland and Norway and the various places cited in the play (Glamis, Fife, Cawdor) and images of the Scottish and Norwegian flags. We learned about the battle

and the betrayal of the traitor, the Thane of Glamis, by physically embodying the battle.

Our creation of the heath offers an example of employing all the principles in one exercise. A 'heath' was not a concept the students were familiar with since 'heath' does not have a clear equivalent in BSL. One key finding for us was how the translation of Shakespeare into sign language necessitates a physical and contextual understanding of a word in order to understand its meaning, mirroring more overtly the process of embodied cognition for non-deaf students. To gain an understanding of the heath, important as the setting of the first scene, we used a visual image of a misty landscape with trees and birds, and asked the students what they could see, what else might be found there and how it might feel to be there. These questions allowed us to quickly establish their personal understanding and references and then develop this shared understanding. Their descriptive suggestions moved from concrete (trees, rocks, toads) to abstract (cold, lonely, scary) to a sense of the supernatural (mysterious, witches, zombies). We built on this understanding by physically making the scene, with students becoming their own suggestions: trees, birds, zombies, etc. Next we added more atmosphere to this scene by adapting an RSC exercise for building a 'sound-scape' of the weather, encouraging the students to embody the wind, rain, thunder and lightning through visual and kinesthetic cues, rather than sounds.

Another example of using visual rather than auditory cues for action is the story-book image of the off-stage battle we used to convey Scotland's triumph over Norway. The students were asked to become the Scottish court with King Duncan, his two sons, their servants and attendants. The workshop leader then entered 'in role' as the Thane of Ross, and rather than verbally convey the events of the battle, as one might do in a hearing classroom, offered the story-book image, which the students then collaboratively interpreted. Having earlier enacted the battle, it took the students little time to decipher the meaning of the images, and ascertain the King's reaction: 'I am pleased we have won', 'I am happy with Macbeth', 'I am angry with the Thane of Cawdor'.

As a last exercise, influenced by the work of Chilton et al (2019) on the evidence of ToM in the writing of deaf children, we trialed a 'writing-in-role' exercise at Mary Hare. After embodying Macbeth and Banquo receiving the

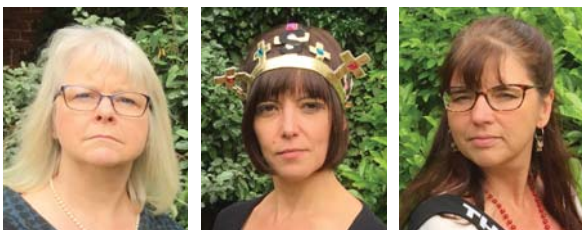
witches' prophecies, the students were asked to write letters home to their respective wives. Although not part of a rigorously designed research project, we hoped to see evidence that embodying a character helps children to engage with that character's thoughts and feelings when writing in the first person. As well as evidencing a keen understanding of the complexities of the plot, the students were able to identify the feelings of Banquo and Macbeth: 'At this very moment, I'm confused'; 'I'm very happy about being made Thane of Cawdor'; 'I and Macbeth are confused seeing what is going to happen and we are both trying to think about it'; and even to project what Banquo or Macbeth might think that their wives were thinking: 'Dear my lovely teddie Bear, I know you might be worried about me (from the battle)', 'Dear Gorgeous Wife, Please don't worry about me getting hurt I am fine'.

Where next?

We intend to further refine our workshop for Act One of Macbeth and trial it with another group of deaf students. Following this, we will structure ten workshop sessions around ten films in BSL, SSS (Sign Supported Shakespeare) and VS (Visual Shakespeare), which will include a supporting package of downloadable resources. Following this, we plan to develop teacher CPD days – and begin work on the next play.

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Angie Wootten is a Teaching Fellow at University of Birmingham.

Dr Abigail Rokison-Woodall is Senior Lecturer at University of Birmingham.

Dr Tracy Irish is Education Associate Practitioner at the Royal Shakespeare Company

We are very keen to hear from any Teachers of the Deaf who are interested in this project in connection with their work with deaf children and young people. For further details contact Angie at A.Wootten@bham.ac.uk

Visit the website, www.dramaticexpressions.co.uk, to learn more about using drama to teach personal, social and emotional skills.

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The cover of the September 2019 issue of BATOD Magazine features a yellow header with the BATOD logo (British Association of Teachers of the Deaf) and the text 'MAGAZINE • Sept 2019 • ISSN 1336-0799 • www.batod.org.uk'. Below the header, the main title 'Curriculum Issues' is displayed in red. The cover is divided into four photographs: a man in a red shirt and a boy in a white shirt speaking into a microphone; a woman and a boy working on a science project; a boy wearing a hearing aid looking at a book; and two people in lab coats working at a science table with various equipment. Text on the cover includes 'Accessible science', 'Managing listening effort', and 'A Peri QTOD's toolkit'. At the bottom, a yellow banner contains the text: 'Join BATOD to get THE Magazine for professionals working with deaf children'.

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