Embodied readings: Exploring the multimodal social semiotic resources of the English classroom

JOHN YANDELL
Institute of Education, University of London

ABSTRACT: *The article presents research into literacy practices in secondary English classrooms in a multicultural urban school. Using data from digital videotape, it brings a multimodal social semiotic approach to bear on the exploration of how literature is read collectively in the classroom, and how teachers encourage the active, embodied reading of these literary texts.*

KEYWORDS: *Keywords: multimodality, social semiotics, heteroglossia, Vygotsky, gesture, reading, improvisation.*

What would an adequate account of English lessons look like? What theoretical perspectives are required to make sense of what happens within a secondary English classroom in an urban, multicultural school? How can we begin to make sense of what is accomplished in such places? One set of answers is provided by recent government policy. In this official version, what English is, how it is experienced, is specified centrally; teaching and learning are objectives-led, skills-based and subject to accountability measures through the imposition of high-stakes standardised tests; the content of English is a thin gruel of context-independent literacy activities (DfEE, 2001; Street, Lefstein & Pahl, 2007). In what follows, what I want to do is to begin to sketch out a different set of answers – answers that are instantiated in specific classroom practice. In paying close attention to this practice, I want to suggest that the richness of the cultural work that takes place in the classroom demands a theoretical synthesis of, as it were, old and new semiotics: to make sense of these English classrooms, we need to use both the multimodal lens of recent social semiotics and Bakhtinian perspectives on language and culture.

The multimodal turn in social semiotic theory has, to a large extent, been promoted as a necessary response to new times, new technologies. The prominence of the screen rather than the page as a site of semiotic activity, the salience of the image, still and moving, across a broad spectrum of media, and the concomitant marginalisation of written (printed) text are taken as facts of cultural life in the 21st Century. Hence, it is argued, there is a need for a multimodal lens through which the new signifying practices, new combinations and ensembles of semiotic material, can be investigated and analysed (Hodge and Kress, 1988; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996 and 2001; Kress, 2003).

But at the same time as multimodality is presented as a necessary response to a changed semiotic landscape, it has also been argued that multimodal activity is nothing new (Kress, 2001; Kress, Jewitt, Ogborn & Tsatsarelis, 2001; Franks, 2003; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Coupland & Gwyn, 2003). From this perspective, multimodal theory reveals truths at least as old as Cicero, to whom it was perfectly clear that rhetoric was not just a matter

of what was said but of how it was said, and of the mutually complementary systems of word and gesture (Kendon, 2000). In this version of multimodality, to treat language, either spoken or written, as a monomodal system was always to deal in abstractions: monomodal assumptions thus amounted to a failure to recognise the materiality of the book or the *billet-doux*, to ignore the simple fact that words are spoken (and heard) by physical bodies situated in specific (and semiotically significant) spaces. It is this second, older version of multimodality which will inform much of what follows.

There is, of course, no fundamental contradiction between these two sides of multimodality; indeed, it is reasonable to suggest that it is precisely the affordances of the new media that have alerted us to aspects of social semiosis that previously it had been easier to ignore. This last point has a general application in relation to the sociocultural world; it also has a particular relevance to questions of research method within the social sciences. The new technologies that have made multimodality an unmissable feature of contemporary life have also made it possible for the researcher to pay proper attention to the multimodal meanings that have always been in front of our noses. Where once we had to rely on audio tape recordings of significant interactions (and hence transcripts that perforce privileged the spoken word), now the availability of digital video enables us to record and analyse a much wider ensemble of semiotic resources as they are deployed – and remade (LeBaron & Streeck, 2000; Franks & Jewitt, 2001; Goodwin, 2001).

In what follows, I want to suggest that an adequate account of reading, of pedagogy and of learning within secondary English classrooms needs to pay attention to the multimodal work that goes on in them. I want to focus attention on two lessons, taught by two different teachers to two different classes. The lessons were observed as part of a longer-term research project, focused on the ways that literary texts are read in English lessons in an urban secondary comprehensive school in East London. A total of 37 one-hour lessons were observed, from April 2005 to June 2006; 27 of these lessons were videotaped. The digital video footage was viewed and reviewed alongside field notes; transcripts were made of sections of lessons and single frames were extracted from the video footage. In the following presentation and analysis of data from two of these lessons, an attempt has been made to use some of these still images, supplemented by description, to capture something of the complexity of the video data.[1]

YEAR 10 EXPLORE ARTHUR MILLER

In the first of these lessons, from January 2006, a Year 10 class (fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds) is exploring Arthur Miller's *A view from the bridge*. I have indicated that the main emphasis of my investigation will be on what I have characterised as the older multimodality of embodied social semiotic activity. At the start of the lesson, however, there is a sequence that is only rendered possible because of the multimodal affordances of the new information and communications technologies. As the students enter the classroom, they notice – and pay attention to – the image displayed on the interactive

---

[1] I would like to thank the two teachers, represented here as Pascal and Maeve, whose lessons I observed and videotaped.

whiteboard. It is an aerial view of the school and the surrounding area, downloaded from the Google website. Its presence on the IWB, and the students' reading of it, produced an opening to the lesson that differed noticeably from what I had observed on other occasions in this class's English lessons.

In the normal course of events, the students do not enter the classroom *en masse*; they trickle in, individually or in small groups. Partly this is because they come from different lessons, and hence from different parts of the school building; partly it is because, at the times when one lesson ends and another begins, the corridors and stairways function as a social space, where students meet and interact. For this Year 10 class, the social spaces and interactions of the corridor tend to permeate the classroom. Conversations begun outside the classroom continue within it, and there is a fairly leisurely attitude taken towards whatever it is that the teacher has decided should be the business of the English lesson. It takes time for seating arrangements to be sorted out, time for coats and the other "non-uniform" items, which the school rules decree should not be worn in class, to be removed. And, of course, the teacher's relationship with the class is implicated in all of this. His arrangement of the furniture – café style, as it is sometimes termed – with clusters of tables around which students sit, together with his markedly respectful, quiet and polite way of addressing the students, lies at a particular point on the spectrum of possible approaches towards classroom management and organisation. The students, meanwhile, can be seen as contesting the official script, the power relations of the institution, in a myriad of tiny actions – the length of time taken to remove a jacket, to end a conversation, to sit in an assigned seat – each of which seems to signal a desire to hang on to other identities, other ways of being, and a reluctance to accept the particular *habitus* of school student that the institution seeks to impose on them.

In today's lesson, as usual, students' arrivals in the classroom are dispersed across a two-minute period. What is unusual is that their attention is more or less immediately caught by the image on the screen. This difference is manifested in speech, in that the first conversations in the room are about something that is present – the image on the screen:

> Rebecca[2]:   That's the football pitch
> Jamal (sitting down by window): What's that from?

Much more obvious, though, is the difference in the orientation of students' posture and gaze. Ten seconds into the lesson, Rebecca is standing in front of the IWB, looking at it; Sean enters; Imran is sitting, also looking at the IWB. Sean walks across the room towards his seat; he turns towards the board as he does so – following Rebecca's gaze; Halima enters and also looks at the IWB. Rebecca approaches the board; Halima and Sean are all standing directly in front of the board, as Rebecca points at a spot on it (it is at this moment, 25 seconds into the lesson, that she makes the utterance transcribed above). Tariq approaches the board, stands to Rebecca's left.

---

[2] The names of participants (students and teachers) have been changed to culturally appropriate pseudonyms.

Forty seconds later, more students have entered the room. Almost all are congregated around the board; those who are further away are also looking at it.

Contrast this moment with a frame, two minutes into the lesson, from the video footage of the class's English lesson three days later:

Single frames cannot capture very much of the difference which I am seeking to describe. What is salient, I think, in this juxtaposition is the question of gaze. In the first frame, there is a single focus for the students' gaze – and it is clear from this where the students' interest lies; in the second frame, the dispersed gazes of the students reveals the extent to which there is not, at this moment, a common, unified interest in what is going on in the lesson. The second frame, I want to suggest, is much more representative of the early parts of the class's English lessons.

As one can see from the second frame, the IWB was also switched on in the later lesson, but it clearly did not function as a pole of attraction in the way that it had in the lesson under consideration. Why was this? The answer, so obvious that it might appear banal, is that the aerial view of the school meant something to the students. The IWB acted as a node, as it were, a meeting point of local, everyday knowledge and school knowledge (Vygotsky, 1986). Questions of representation and provenance, inevitably and inextricably the business of English lessons, were here located in the students' sense of

their immediate environment – and hence both Rebecca's identification of *the* football pitch and Jamal's question about where the image came from, how it arrived on the screen in the classroom.

The image was not part of the planned lesson. As Pascal, the teacher, says:

> OK, I had absolutely no intention of having this map up at the beginning of the lesson, I had it up at the end of the last lesson, but it's made me think....

And, as he speaks, he zooms out from the view of the school to an image of most of the northern hemisphere:

> OK, when we did the lesson on Alfieri's speech and I was showing you those maps, I didn't know about this bit of Google, which I just might use instead ...we talked about how Alfieri said he lived in New York, how he came from Sicily, he was born in Italy, he said, and he lived in New York, and this wasn't Sicily he said, this was Brooklyn, this was Red Hoo....OK we've just about in this picture we got Sicily there (he points at the board)

What the teacher is doing is exploiting the interest that the students have shown in the image to enable the students to make connections, connections between this lesson and earlier lessons as well as connections between local/unschooled knowledge and more disciplinary knowledges, between geography and the literary text that the class is studying:

> Teacher: and that there is Manhattan, the posh expensive bit, the island where the Empire State Building and the World Trade Centre were....and Brooklyn ....Manhattan's up there, and this is Brooklyn, have a look at it, what can you see?
> Martin: buildings
> Teacher: buildings, anything else?
> Amina: water, river?
> Teacher: OK where's the water?
> Rebecca: forest
> Teacher: there's lots of trees....but look at the buildings, how they are laid out....in rows, and rows and rows, so this, I'd say, I'm pretty sure, that's the Brooklyn Bridge – that's the bridge in *A view from the bridge*....and this would be the waterfront, those would be the docks that Eddie works in, the shorefront except of course that this was, this is probably a couple of years ago, as opposed to 1955, OK, something to bear in mind.

The whole episode takes only seven minutes. It is, I think, an adroit pedagogical move, using the affordances of the technology (the interactive whiteboard linked to the resources of the internet) to provide students with a bridge between their own sense of place and the places of the play – from the contemporary dockland of East London to an historical New York waterfront. Simultaneously, the technology is used as a bridge between the possibility of representing their local area through aerial images and the representation of 1950s Brooklyn in Miller's play.

I want to explore this last point in a little more detail. There is, it is true, little in the spoken interaction in this section of the lesson that directs explicit attention towards questions of representation or perspective. What I would like to suggest, though, is that the activity itself foregrounds these questions. Much of what is achieved here could have been presented by other means. Pascal could have arrived at the lesson equipped with a globe, an atlas and a collection of photographic images of mid-twentieth-century New York (though such resources could not have been easily assembled in the impromptu manner that defines Pascal's response to students' interest here). Had he done so, it would have been highly unlikely that anyone would have asked the question that Jamal poses right at the start: "What's that from?" By interrogating the provenance of resources, the question opens up questions of agency: who has assembled these resources, for what purposes? Moments later, as Pascal, responding to students' interest in the IWB image by improvising a geography lesson, begins to change the image from the close-up aerial view of the school, one of the students asks "What's the point of zooming out?" The question does much more than reveal a shared technical language and a shared expertise in manipulating images and perspectives: it focuses attention on the activity, and hence on the agency of the viewer. And these questions – from whose point of view are these objects being seen, and for what purposes? – are pertinent questions to ask in relation to *A view from the bridge*. The fact that these questions are asked is itself evidence of what this episode makes possible. What I am also suggesting here is that students can ask these questions because of the way that the teacher uses the affordances of the technology to render visible the viewer's agency in selecting and framing particular views and particular subjects. There is a relationship, therefore, a complex and productive interaction between the different social semiotic modes in play in the classroom, between the teacher's and students' language-as-speech, their use of gaze and posture to signal engagement, the images on the IWB and the printed text of the play.

The interactivity here, then, is what Moss, Jewitt, Levačić, Armstrong, Cardini & Castle (2007) have termed "Conceptual interactivity – where the focus is on interacting with, exploring and constructing curriculum concepts and ideas" (p. 40). In reporting on one of their case study examples, taken from a Maths lesson, Moss *et al.* argue that:

> What is important for learning is how the design of the text reshapes curriculum knowledge. What is to be learnt and how it can be learnt become clearer. The images....and the opportunity to manipulate these images dynamically offer the students a different representation that is central to the learning task. This representation offers the possibility of making connections between the specialized knowledge of Maths and the everyday knowledge of space and design. It also enables them to draw on other knowledge and experiences and to connect them with mathematics, which in turn repositions them in relation to the production of knowledge (Moss *et al*., 2007, p. 42).

In the next part of the lesson, attention shifts away from the interactive whiteboard and onto the printed text. Yet, even here – especially here – we need a multimodal lens if we are to investigate how Pascal and his students explore *A view from the bridge* in the following 20-minute segment of the lesson. Pascal explains that the activity is a continuation of work started in the previous lesson:

> I'm going to take the register, and instead of replying here or yes or nothing, I want you to um tell me the name of either Eddie, Beatrice or Catherine, one thing they did with their hands, and either what it says about them or one reason that you think Arthur Miller has included this, OK, so either Eddie, Beatrice or Catherine, one thing they do with their hands, in those first ten pages we've read, and one reason why the playwright might have told the actor to do this.

In issuing these instructions, the dominant mode employed by the teacher is language-as-speech: he tells the students what they are to do, how they are to respond to their names. The message – a message about the task but also about power relations in the classroom – is, however, echoed in other modes. Pascal has taken a position at the front centre of the room, in front of the IWB. He sits on the teacher's desk, facing the class. While he talks, he uses his fingers to enumerate the three parts of the task.

All of these other modes – positioning, posture, gaze and gesture – have clear regulatory functions: they are part of the ensemble of multimodal resources whereby the teacher organises and manages the work of the class. I want to focus attention on one of these modes, gesture, because what Pascal accomplishes through gesture is much more than the maintenance of power relationships in the classroom. In this instance, too, gesture has a special place because it is directly implicated in the content of the lesson: gesture functions, then, as a managerial and a heuristic tool as well as being an object of study.

Something of the power of gesture can be glimpsed at an earlier moment in the lesson.

Time	Teacher movement/gesture	Student movement/gesture	Speech
04:17	gestures towards the door; stands by Salman, gesturing towards the door with his thumb	another student arrives in the doorway, says something	*Salman*: Shut up you fat cunt
		Salman, still sitting, turns towards teacher	*Teacher*: Salman, get out
	places both hands over his eyes		*Salman*: What, no, I'm sorry, I'm sorry
	Teacher closes the door after Salman, returns towards the board	Salman gets up and leaves the room, apologises as he does so	*Salman*: Sorry

While ascribing causality to any one "turn" within such an interaction is fraught with difficulty, it seems that the moment when Pascal convinces Salman that he does indeed have to leave the room is not when he issues the injunction to leave, nor even when he gestures towards the door with his thumb, but when he makes the much more theatrical gesture of covering his face with his hands. This movement breaks the eye contact between student and teacher; it signals disengagement but also, possibly, despair. It achieves meanings that words could not: words would prolong the conversation, keeping the possibility of dialogue – and hence, as it were, of plea-bargaining – alive. Pascal's gesture tells Salman that the time has come to beat a tactical retreat, and he does so. (There is something slightly exaggerated, pantomimic about the whole interaction – as, indeed, there is about Salman's return to the class, a couple of minutes later, when he tiptoes in while Pascal's back is turned.)

When Pascal invites students to give examples of what the three main characters do with their hands, the first few contributions are made and received largely through the mode of language-as-speech. Other modes are at play, but operate entirely in a regulatory function as means whereby the teacher organises the discourse. He directs his gaze towards the student whom he has invited to speak; he stands at the front of the room, register cradled in his left elbow, pen in his right hand, and appears to tick off students as each offers their example of a gesture. What is being emphasised here is not simply a power relationship but a concern to establish an inclusive practice: Pascal uses the register as a sign that this is an activity in which all can participate, and in which all are expected to participate.

Something else happens when Rumina refers to the moment in the play when Catherine leads Eddie to the armchair. Pascal raises his right arm, extends it horizontally to his side, and looks along it, to a point beyond his hand: he performs, in other words, the gesture that Rumina has chosen as her example.

Here, then, gesture has moved from a regulatory to a heuristic function: this is, Pascal indicates, what the stage direction means, this is what the moment in the play might look like.

A little later in the lesson, Pascal draws the students' attention to Eddie's words to Catherine: "Turn around, lemme see in the back." The teacher's interest here is primarily linguistic – he wants students to be able to identify, and talk about, the grammatical and lexical means whereby Eddie's character is established. But Pascal notices, and capitalises on, the fact that Amina explicates Eddie's speech gesturally:

> OK, good, Amina, do what you did – I just saw you move your arm, didn't you?

And Pascal repeats Amina's gesture, lifting his right arm and making a circling motion with his hand:

Such sequences are significant. They suggest the beginnings of a move towards a reconceptualisation of the written text as a performance text – just as the focus throughout this part of the lesson on the stage directions and hand movements of the characters emphasises the extent to which the play's meanings are made multimodally. And yet Amina's single gesture, her interpretation of the hand movement that might accompany Eddie's words to Catherine, is, I think, the only moment in the lesson when a student makes such a move: it is the only time when a student makes, as it were, an embodied contribution to the learning.

Why this might be the case is suggested at another moment in this part of the lesson, when Pascal steps back from the activity itself, from the identification and explication of gesture within the playscript, to provide students with a rationale for the activity:

> Lots of people yesterday, about three different people...were asking what's the point of this? I don't get it, what's the point of this? Um, the examining board give us a few objectives, and this is actually, this is what I'm supposed to be teaching you, not necessarily in *A view from the bridge*, but as part of the course, it's one of the GCSE objectives, I've made it a bit shorter.
>
> [reading from a slide he has put up on the IWB] *Understand how writers use devices to achieve their effects and comment on ways language changes* – it's my job to teach you how to do that, according to the exam board.

The activity, then, is located in the learning objectives prescribed by the GCSE examination board (and, though Pascal does not say this, derived by the board from the National Curriculum). The way in which the teacher frames the activity helps to explain why, in exploring the meaning of gesture in the play, linguistic modes (language-as-speech, language-as-writing) have tended to remain dominant. The focus of the students' attention is on the play as a written text, the work of Arthur Miller, and not, primarily, the play as a performance text, the collaborative work of an acting company. Again, this is something that Pascal is quite explicit about:

> we're not watching it, so we don't see the actors doing this, we're reading it and thinking about it as something that Arthur Miller has written [Pascal returns to the IWB, making a circling motion with his hand around the words that refer to the writer's use of devices], in which these stage directions are the devices, OK, the devices he uses to have an effect, because we're reading it, because we're not watching it....

In itself, this is a remarkable instance of accountability, of a teacher offering to the class an account of the processes in which he and the students are involved. It is an account that points in two directions, both towards the requirements of the examination syllabus and towards the material conditions in which the reading of the text is being produced. What this move accomplishes is the creation of a space in which the complexity, the Bakhtinian multi-voicedness of this reading (Bakhtin, 1981) can be explored and reflected upon.

Having spent time focusing on Eddie's "Turn around, lemme look in the back" as a way of eliciting the linguistic particularity of the character, the voice that the actor playing Eddie must inhabit, Pascal directs the students' attention to the stage directions:

> Teacher:...so as we read it, as Rebecca has been reading out all the stage directions, Rebecca – you're not reading it in Eddie's voice are you?
> Rebecca: [???]
> Teacher: are you reading it in B's?
> ??
> Teacher: so whose voice are you reading the stage directions in?
> Rebecca: my voice
> Teacher: yours, excellent, OK so one voice could be the reader's. Who's talking to us as Rebecca is reading this, who's putting these words into her mouth?
> Tariq: the er, the writer
> Teacher: good, so another voice could be the writer's, all words, I think, are in someone's voice....or in several voices, and as we've said, this is in Rebecca's voice, it's in Arthur Miller's voice, we're hearing them all at the same time – this one [pointing to Eddie's words on the IWB] is in Tariq's voice, it's in Eddie's voice, and also it's the writer's voice
> Amina: Tariq?
> Teacher: because he's been reading the part of Eddie, just like Rebecca has been the stage directions [pause] and as well as all that, it's in the voice that we imagine Tariq may be trying to achieve, sometimes when he reads it you may feel oh I don't think Eddie would say it like that, so we've got, um, the reader, the character, the writer, the actor, the audience and probably loads of others, OK?

The development here is from Rebecca's straightforward, commonsense response (she reads the stage directions, so obviously they are in her voice), through the idea of the ventriloquism that is inherent in scripted drama (actors speaking someone else's words, the words put in their mouths, authorised, by the writer), to a much more subtle model of polyphony, of the simultaneous presence and apprehension of multiple voices inhabiting the text.

This model situates the students differently from the position allocated to them in Pascal's earlier version of the author-text-reader relationship, where "we're reading it and thinking about it as something that Arthur Miller has written, in which these stage directions are the devices...he uses to have an effect." In the earlier version, authority rests with the writer. In this model, on the other hand, the interpretive space offered to both reader and audience is not merely the opportunity to construe the intentions of the playwright, but rather to compare actual readings with a range of other possible readings, readings that are products of the readers' own interpretive decisions. Within this heteroglossia, Pascal's earlier distinction between reading and performance also becomes less clear-cut. The students to whom parts have been assigned are represented as actors, the rest of the class as audience.

And yet, of course, the modes of performance are constrained: for all the attention paid to stage directions and to gesture, the students only get to do (and hear) the voices. There are many reasons why this is so – to do with examination syllabuses and assessment criteria, the social dynamic of the class and the fact that Pascal, in his first year as a teacher, is still establishing a relationship with the class and developing a sense of what might be possible within the parameters of secondary English as it is instantiated in his classroom.

YEAR 9 EXPLORE *RICHARD III*

I want now to turn to a different lesson, one in which students draw on a different range of multimodal social semiotic resources in making sense of a complex text. I will focus on the final fourteen minutes of a Year 9 English lesson (thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds) from November, 2005. The class had recently started work on *Richard III*. They had read the first part of Act 1, and had watched the openings of two film versions, starring Laurence Olivier and Ian McKellen respectively in the title role. In the first part of this lesson, students were analysing still images taken from the two films, discussing the ways in which Richard was represented in each. This is how Maeve, the teacher, sets up the final activity of the lesson, an activity that is intended to prepare students for reading the next part of the play, the scene in which Richard woos Anne:

> Teacher: OK, we can do this quite quickly, all right, and you can be in a three and you can be in a three, what I want you to do, just very quickly, I want you to do a very quick role-play
> Billy: Yes!

Teacher: I want one person, listen, one person has to persuade the other person to do something that they really, really, really, really don't want to do, OK, so I want you think about, you can be anything, anything at all, not want to do whatever it is you decide and I don't want it to end up with punching somebody and forcing them to do something [Nazrul throws punch and makes appropriate sound effect] you have to do it with words, OK,

Student: can I be anything?

Teacher: you can be girls, boys....

Kirsty: [holding up image that they have been analysing] have you got to base it on the picture?

Teacher: no, it's not based on the picture, it's not based on anything, you can pick any situation with any characters you like but one person has to be persuading another person or other people to do something that they do not want to do

Kirsty: has it got to be Richard and them lot?

Teacher: no, it can be anybody, anybody you like

Billy's positive response to the news that the class is to work on role-play is representative of the class's attitude to such activities: students are both used to, and enthusiastic about, such activities. It is interesting, too, that there is an assumption on the part of at least some of the students that the improvisations that they devise should be obviously related to the work they have been doing on *Richard III*: Maeve has to repeat, four times, that students are free to choose any role at all – that they do not have to base their work on the characters or the events of the play. (The activity is thus different from the role-play I have described from an observation of the class's exploration of *Julius Caesar* some six months earlier (Yandell, 2007). In that earlier lesson, students took on the roles of characters from the play, at specific moments in the play.   Their improvisations there were thus more constrained, explorations of the interactions of given characters at defined moments leading up to the assassination of Caesar.)

In another respect, it might seem that the teacher is being highly prescriptive.   Her injunction that the students have to achieve the persuasion "with words" might appear to indicate that the only mode available is language-as-speech. While there is an emphasis here on the persuasive power of language, the main force of this warning is clear from the context – "I don't want it to end up with punching somebody and forcing them to do something." In any case, what happens next is anything but monomodal.

In the preceding forty-five minutes of the lesson, the organisation of the classroom had conformed to a paradigm that is instantly recognisable from the vast majority of secondary school lessons, not only within English but across a broad swathe of the curriculum. With very few exceptions, students remained seated throughout.   Their attention was focused, to a greater or lesser extent, on the teacher at the front of the room, introducing the lesson and explaining the activities, on the materials on the tables in front of them, and on their partners (while working on the analysis of the images taken from the productions of *Richard III*). Their contribution to the lesson had been almost entirely through the modes of language-as-writing, in annotating the images, and language-as-speech, in discussing the images with their partners and with the rest of the class. Legitimate activity – work – might reasonably have been construed as participation in these modes. Other semiotic resources are deployed by the students, but only in ways that

are strictly ancillary: hands are raised to indicate that the student has something to say; aspects of the images are identified by pointing gestures; participation in pair work or in whole-class talk is signalled by the direction of gaze and by changes in the orientation of the body.   A sense of this can be gleaned from a view of part of the classroom immediately after the teacher has set up the role-play activity:

Where the groups – such as those in the middle of the picture – have already been constituted, the students have tended to turn towards each other, thereby both signalling the identity of the group and enabling planning talk to happen within the group.   In contrast, the students furthest from the camera have not yet established their group: negotiations are being conducted across the tables, as is evident from the direction of gaze.

These, though, are merely slight variations. Within two minutes, the classroom as a site of social semiotic activity has been utterly transformed:

All the students are now on their feet. This has not happened all at once. Some students had moved around the room as they formed their groups. Then, at different moments during the two minutes, groups of students moved from their seats to spaces in between the tables as they began to develop their role-plays. No one has told them to stand, to

move – but they know that this is both allowed and also, in some sense, expected of them. (The activity has a history: it is part of a pattern of such activities, part of the class's experience of English with Maeve as their teacher [Yandell, 2007].) The expectation can be inferred from the decision that the teacher makes about where to intervene: the groups where she lingers, where she chooses to interact with the students, are those who have remained seated when others have begun to move around. It would seem that standing up indicates a specific stage in the activity, reached when the group has decided on the scenario and on the allocation of roles.

For five minutes more, the rehearsals continue. The classroom is noisy, bustling, seemingly chaotic. Then, with the minimum of fuss, Maeve brings the class back together again so that the performances can begin:

> if we're quick on the swapping over, we can get them all in, come on, and we'll talk about them tomorrow in the lesson, right, ready, go...

And the first role-play starts. A performance space has been created along one side of the classroom. In the first scenario, three female friends meet. Lucy and Helen know that Jo's boyfriend (whose name is Richard) has been unfaithful to her, and they want to persuade her to end the relationship:

Lucy:	tell her about Richard
Helen:	he was cheating on you
Jo:	you just want me to break up with him
Lucy:	he was in the cinema, with some other girl
Jo:	I don't care, I've heard it all so many times, I don't care....he's rich
Lucy:	just because he's rich, it doesn't mean you have to be his bitch, man, you're such a gold digger

The scenario and the roles that the girls adopt are familiar from the stock situations and characters of soap opera. Their dialogue achieves all of this with great economy, establishing Helen and Lucy as the loyal friends, Jo as the conflicted lover. To acknowledge this, though, is merely to recognise that the students are able to draw on a stock of shared cultural knowledge. The activity provides an opportunity for the girls to

explore relationships and the difficult ethical questions that arise from them. What are the obligations of friendship? How can competing claims – of loyalty, of economic wellbeing, of romantic ideals – be reconciled?

But the social semiotic work that the group does is not reducible to the dialogue that they have improvised. As Anton Franks has argued: "In improvised drama, the body acts as a form of representation and allows the possibility of transforming everyday spaces (everyday classrooms, for instance) into theatrical spaces" (Franks, 1996, p. 107).

They use the physical resources of their bodies and of the performance space to make meanings. The solidarity and intimacy of the three friends is represented by their physical closeness, Lucy's power by her central position within the group as well as by her insistent eye-contact with Jo, whose reluctance to accept her friends' counsel is communicated as much by gaze and body language, her tendency to avoid eye-contact and to turn slightly away from the other two, as it is by the words she speaks. When Lucy says, "Just because he's rich, it doesn't mean you have to be his bitch," the epigrammatic force of her words is emphasised by a dismissive flick of her left hand. The implication of the gesture is that the choice that confronts Jo is not simply over whether to continue the relationship with Richard, since what she decides about Richard will affect how she is seen by her friends, and therefore how they will relate to her in the future: Lucy's gesture, therefore, can be construed as a warning, or even a threat. It has been enough to persuade Jo, who moves away from the group, meets Richard and informs him that it is all over between them.

In the following improvisation, the performance space becomes a shopping centre, where Abdul is walking with his father. They pass a window where a new video game is displayed, and Abdul attempts to convince his father that he should buy the game for him. If in some ways this scenario seems to draw more on the out-of-school lives and interests of the students, the style in which the scene is acted suggests something rather less mundane. Alongside the words with which he promises, in effect, to become the perfect son, Abdul produces the most supplicatory of facial expressions, his eyes beseechingly wide; and, when these do not achieve the desired outcome, he prostrates himself, kneeling before his father. There is an arch knowingness about Abdul's heightened use

of facial expression and body language that might, perhaps, owe more to Bollywood than to first-hand experience.

In the third group's improvisation, three chairs are rearranged to form the interior of a car. Kemi, driving, informs Kirsty, her front-seat passenger, that there is a job for her:

> Kemi: Kirsty, the boss has called you in for some special business, there's a man you have to cap...to join the crew....you need the money for your mother's breast cancer, so I don't wanna hear....your cousin could just disappear, you know, Kirsty, that would be so unfortunate, don't you think....now, Kirsty, here's the gun, and they're coming now, I better not hear you flop, the boss won't be happy

There is much to admire about the performance. Kemi's speech shows that she knows a thing or two about the language of persuasion: there is the lexis of the criminal underworld, as represented in a wealth of texts from *The big sleep* to *The Bill* ("the boss....special business....to cap"); there is an appeal to an economic motive that operates simultaneously as an assumption that family loyalties trump any adherence to wider social or ethical concerns ("you need the money for your mother's breast cancer"); and there is the deliciously minatory use of polite understatement ("that would be so unfortunate, don't you think"). Equally impressive, though, is the way that the group has marshalled its resources to produce an improvisation within which Kemi can create so menacing a character. The hand movements that represent her manipulation of the steering wheel function as a reminder of the claustrophobic car interior that is the setting, while simultaneously emphasising her character's dominance and control. Clothes, meanwhile, become signifiers of gang membership: Jenny, silent and impassive on the back seat, wears a hood, Kemi is muffed in scarf and woolly hat – while only Kirsty, the novice, is bareheaded. In rehearsal earlier, Kirsty had also worn a scarf as a makeshift hood: the decision to discard this for the performance itself is one that emphasises her character's precarious status on the periphery of the gang. In the exuberant profusion of reasons offered in Kemi's speech, Kirsty's lack of headgear reinforces the importance of one motive in particular: "to join the crew". (Amongst other effects, then, what the role-play activity does is to create the possibility that students' non-uniform items, which

generally, as I indicated above, intrude on the lesson only as part of the students' counterscript, their contestation of the identity imposed on them by the disciplinary regime of the school as institution, become resources for cultural making – and hence for learning within the official script of the lesson.)

THE BODY AS DIALOGIC CLASSROOM RESOURCE

Pascal, in the lesson on *A view from the bridge* which I discuss above, makes explicit to the class the connection between, on the one hand, the focus on gesture and the stage directions through which Miller specifies gesture, and, on the other, the overarching framework of the GCSE syllabus and its assessment objectives. There are, as I have suggested, other things going on in the lesson, other ways of thinking about the script and its realisation in the particular conditions of performance that pertain to the classroom. Nonetheless, the teacher is at pains to ensure that students understand that the stage directions that they read in their copies of the play are "devices" whereby the writer achieves identifiable "effects." He is thus teaching in the manner promoted by current government policy (the *Framework for English*'s encouragement of "teaching to objectives that are shared with pupils" [DfEE 2001, p. 18]).

In Maeve's lesson, in contrast, the students' work on role-play is not informed by any explicit learning objective. What, then, is the relationship between these performances and what might be construed as the teacher's objective? In relation to the learning that the teacher plans, the connection has to be inferred from two sources. Firstly, there is Maeve's instruction when she sets up the activity: "One person has to persuade the other person to do something that they really, really, really, really don't want to do." Secondly, there is the place that the lesson occupies in the reading of *Richard III*: the class is about to read Act 1, scene 2, in which Richard woos Anne. He does this over the corpse of Henry VI, who is, in Shakespeare's version of history, her father-in-law.[3] It would have been perfectly possible for Maeve to have said to the class something along the lines of: "We are about to read a scene in the play in which Richard manages to persuade somebody who hates him, someone whose husband and father-in-law he has killed, to marry him. I want you to explore how he might manage to do this, so I would like you to try improvising such a scene." She does not do so; more than this, as I noted above, she emphasises to the students that there is no necessary connection in character or situation between the improvisations and the play.

What happens in the lesson is that the students produce a wide variety of situations and characters. Apart from the three I have already described, there is a scene in a nightclub, where a reluctant dancer succumbs to peer pressure and takes to the floor; a conversation

---

[3] She was betrothed to Edward, Henry VI's son, at the time of his death at the battle of Tewkesbury (1471). And not, as the Standards website informs us, "his dead brother's widow" (Lesson 2 PowerPoint, slide 9, downloaded from "Teaching Shakespeare to able pupils: Lessons to provide challenge for pupils working towards Level 7 in reading Shakespeare" http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/secondary/keystage3/subjects/english/shakespeare/teaching_learning/able_pupils/ accessed 12 April 2007).

where someone is cajoled into taking drugs for the first time; and another where a young man agrees to participate in a violent attack on an elderly neighbour. I want to say something, later, about the creativity of these performances. Even within the narrower context of the class's developing understanding of *Richard III*, however, this fourteen-minute section at the end of a lesson seems to me to have been remarkably effective as a means of preparing students to grasp the astonishing seduction scene in the play. It would be tempting to conclude that the students' performances show how much they already knew about persuasion, about the multimodal semiotic terrain wherein relationships are instantiated and whereby power is established and contested. But it might be more accurate to suggest that the performances enabled students to learn (more) about these things.

Eight months later, when I was feeding back some of the preliminary results of my research to the class, I explained that I had already shown some of the footage of their role-plays to different groups of teachers. I said that there had been some discussion among the teachers as to whether the activity could be construed as a legitimate part of English lessons. The students assured me that it could. Kirsty commented:

> role-play lets you like express yourself more in words that you can't say, like, you can act, you can act something out that you don't know how to say, it helps you more to explain (transcript of lesson, 7 July 2006)

Foyzur added:

> it's like you're saying something through your actions and you can hear them and....see what's going on instead of just reading so you understand in a different way (ibid.).

Terry Eagleton has made an argument for the importance of embodied experience that intersects interestingly with the students' justification for role-play:

> The body is the most palpable sign that we have of the givenness of human existence. It is not something we get to choose. My body is not something I decided to walk around in, like a toupee. It is not something I am "in" at all. Having a body is not like being inside a tank. Who would be this disembodied "I" inside it? It is more like having a language. Having a language, as we have seen, is not like being trapped inside a tank or a prison house; it is a way of being in the midst of a world. To be on the 'inside' of a language is to have a world opened up to you, and thus be on the 'outside' of it at the same time. The same is true of the human body. Having a body is a way of going to work on the world, not a way of being walled off from it. It would be odd to complain that I could come at things better if only I could shuck off my flesh. It would be like complaining that I could talk to you better if only this crude, ineffectual stuff called speech did not get in the way (Eagleton 2003, p. 166).

For Eagleton, "Having a body is a way of going to work on the world." The emphasis on the materiality of existence, and hence of semiotic production, is helpful. I wonder, though, if Eagleton has gone quite far enough. Though he sees it as "like having a language", for him the givenness of the corporeal seems to be its dominant, defining property. What Kirsty's conception of role-play suggests, on the other hand, is a view of

the body as a semiotic and heuristic resource. This is precisely what Maeve's students exemplify and enact: with extraordinary economy, they use a wide range of resources – language, gesture, movement, clothing – to inhabit and explore the roles and relationships that they create. These resources are both irreducibly physical and, at the same time, inescapably cultural. The students' meanings are made and mediated intertextually, in and through culture. That is true of the words spoken but also of the gestures made – of Kemi spinning an imaginary steering wheel or of Abdul going down on his knees to beg a video game from his father.

From one perspective, then, this is just another strategy, a remarkably circuitous way of preparing students to read a section of a Shakespeare play. But it is a strategy that, by implication, offers different answers to the question of what English is for, and to the question of what literary texts are for. There is an unfashionable inexplicitness in relation to learning objectives, in contrast with Pascal's practice noted above: Maeve asks the students to rehearse and perform their improvisations, but does not even hint at the rationale for this activity. Because of this, the students remain free to draw on a wide repertoire of cultural resources, to make meaning with all the means at their disposal. And thus, when the class gets to read Richard's scene with Anne, his words are filled with a much denser semiotic load, a much richer and more complicated network of cultural understandings of persuasion and power relations. Around Richard's voice echoes the voices of the students' role-play characters and of the diverse texts and genres on which these improvisations drew. When the students see Richard fall on his knees before Anne, their sense of the complex and contradictory meanings of this gesture, the irony of Richard's apparent submission working as a sign of his control, is informed and inflected by their memory of Ali kneeling before his father in the classroom-become-a-street. I want to suggest, therefore, that the Bakhtinian concept of heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1981) applies here not just to language but also to the other modes employed by the students in their role-plays. Furthermore, this multimodal multivoicedness is rendered possible by the teacher's generous – loosely-defined, unprescriptive – conception of the activity.

I want to suggest, too, that what happens in these role-plays is precisely the dialectical movement between everyday (or "spontaneous") and scientific concepts that Vygotsky (1986) identified as the salient property of instruction. Students make new meanings from the material at their disposal: that is what is happening when they draw on the cultural resources available to them to create the situations, characters and interactions of their role-plays. If these role-plays then enable them to make sense of Richard's wooing of Anne, to understand more, and differently, what such a scene might mean, their reading of Shakespeare then enables them to understand more, and differently, the performances that they have created.

Barthes' distinction between readerly and writerly texts is of relevance here:

> Our literature is characterized by a pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader. This reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness – he is intransitive; he is, in short, *serious*: instead of functioning himself, instead of

> gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or to reject the text: reading is nothing more than a *referendum*. Opposite the writerly text, then, is its countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read, but not written: the *readerly*. We call any readerly text a classic text (Barthes 1973/1990, p. 4).

The distinction, though, is not between categories of text but between ways of reading. In the lesson that I analysed above, *A view from the bridge* remains, to a large extent, readerly: the divorce between producer and user is one that the assessment criteria, attended to by the teacher, enforce: the students' task is, from a distance, to identify and appreciate (as a customer, a user) the devices whereby the writer achieves his effects. And yet, even here, the divide threatens to break down, to collapse under the weight of the multivoicedness of the production of the text in the classroom. What Maeve's pedagogy does is to transform *Richard III* into a writerly text: in her classroom as they produce the multimodal texts of their role-plays, students gain access to "the magic of signifier, the pleasure of writing."

What emerges from both of these two lessons is a version of English that cannot be encapsulated within the official discourse of current policy. There are, to be sure, significant differences between the two lessons: differences in emphasis, differences in the extent to which assessment regimes exert a prominent, shaping influence, differences, too, that are the product of the particular histories and institutional positioning of the participants. But there are also important points of commonality: in the insistence on the importance of specific acts of cultural making (rather than on tasks designed merely to inculcate generalisable skills) and in the attention that is paid to the agency of the learners, an agency that is historically situated and made manifest in multimodal social semiotic activity.

REFERENCES

Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination* (Ed. M. Holquist). Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.

Barthes, R. (1973/1990). *S/Z*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Coupland, J., & Gwyn, R. (2003). Introduction. In J. Coupland, & R. Gwyn (Eds.), *Discourse, the body, and identity* (pp. 1-16) London: Palgrave Macmillan**.**

DfEE (Department for Education and Employment). (2001). *Key Stage 3 National Strategy: Framework for teaching English: Years 7, 8 and 9*. London: DfEE.

Eagleton, T. (2003). *After theory*. London: Penguin.

Franks, A. (1996). Drama education, the body and representation (or, the mystery of the missing bodies). *Research In Drama Education, 1*(1), 105-119.

Franks, A., & Jewitt, C. (2001). The meaning of action in learning and teaching. *British Educational Research Journal, 27*(2), 201-218.

Franks, A. (2003). Palmers' kiss: Shakespeare, school drama and semiotics. In C. Jewitt, & G. Kress (Eds.), *Multimodal Literacy* (pp. 155-172). New York: Peter Lang.

Goodwin, C. (2001). Practices of seeing visual analysis: An ethnomethodological approach. In T. van Leeuwen, & C. Jewitt (Eds.), *Handbook of visual analysis* (pp. 157-182). London: SAGE.

Hodge, R., & Kress, G. (1988). *Social semiotics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Jewitt, C., & Kress, G. (2003). A multimodal approach to research in education. In S. Goodman, T. Lillis, J. Maybin, & N. Mercer (Eds.), *Language, literacy and education: A reader* (pp. 277-292). Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham/Open University.

Jewitt, C., & Kress, G. (Eds.). (2003). *Multimodal literacy*. New York: Peter Lang.

Kendon, A. (2000). Language and gesture: Unity or duality? In D. McNeill (Ed.), *Language and gesture* (pp. 47-63). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the new media age*. London/New York: Routledge.

Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (1996). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design.* London and New York: Routledge.

Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2001). *Multimodal discourse: The modes and media of contemporary communication*. London: Arnold.

Kress, G., Jewitt, C., Ogborn, J., & Tsatsarelis, C. (2001). *Multimodal teaching and learning: The rhetorics of the science classroom*. London: Continuum.

Kress, G. (2001). "You've just got to learn how to see": Curriculum subjects, young people and schooled engagement with the world. *Linguistics and Education, 11*(4), 401-415.

LeBaron, C., & Streeck, J. (2000). Gestures, knowledge, and the world. In D. McNeill (Ed.), *Language and gesture* (pp. 118-138). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Moss, G., Jewitt, C., Levačić, R., Armstrong, V., Cardini, A., & Castle, F. (2007). *The interactive whiteboards, pedagogy and pupil performance evaluation: An evaluation of the schools whiteboard expansion (SWE) project: London challenge.* London: DfES.

Street, B., Lefstein, A., & Pahl, K. (2007). The National Literacy Strategy in England: Contradictions of control and creativity. In J. Larson, (Ed.), *Literacy as snake oil: Beyond the quick fix* (2nd ed.)(pp. 123-154). New York: Peter Lang.

Vygotsky, L. (1986). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, Mass. & London: The MIT Press.

Yandell, J. (2007). Investigating literacy practices within the secondary English classroom, or where is the text in this class? *Cambridge Journal of Education*, *37*(2), 249-262.