

***Pre-twentieth century literature in the Year 9 classroom: Student responses to different teaching approaches (v.3.1)***

**Abstract**

This article arises from an action research investigation that sought to understand the ways in which different approaches to teaching pre-twentieth century literature in Year 9 English lessons might influence students' experiences of texts. The article examines the proposition that some students need to have a secure understanding of the text before they can benefit from more creative approaches which require them to undertake independent and personal responses. Although creative methods of teaching are often posited as being superior to more teacher-led approaches, student responses suggest that requiring them to participate in creative activities as a means of exploring an unfamiliar text, without first ensuring they have a solid understanding of it, can lead to resistance and disengagement. In this case study, some students both benefited from and appreciated a structured approach that included more 'traditional' approaches to teaching pre-twentieth century literature, which they said helped them to learn ~~better~~more effectively.

Key Words: teaching methods; active approaches; didactic teaching; student confidence; pre-twentieth century literature.

## **Introduction**

Rapid and radical changes to the content and assessment of the English Literature GCSE in the UK mean that students are required to study an entire Shakespeare play, from which an extract from anywhere in the text might be taken for close reading in the examination. Additionally, students need to be able to respond to a previously unprepared ('unseen') pre-twentieth century text. Because the English Literature GCSE can be double-weighted in the Progress 8 and Attainment 8 accountability measures, teachers are under much pressure to ensure that their students are confidently familiar with the detail of texts they have studied. To achieve this objective, many schools are now beginning to teach English Literature GCSE texts in Year 9 and the continual focus on high-stakes examination results has led to much recent debate about the most effective and time-efficient approaches to teaching and learning.

Learning has long been conceived as an 'active, constructive, collaborative, and context bound activity' (Kwakman 2002:149) and teachers are frequently encouraged to adopt pedagogical approaches whereby they create stimulating and creativity inducing learning environments, acting as facilitators in students' learning processes. This 'self-teaching style' may be contrasted to a 'command style' which, according to Mosston and Ashworth (2008), has similarities to Freire's (1972) notion of 'banking education'. Freire (1972: 45) ~~abhorred~~ objected to the process by which 'students patiently receive, memorise and repeat' communiques from their teacher and believed that the banking model was deliberately employed by the elite as a mechanism of oppressing the masses. Rote-~~method~~ and knowledge banking have

become seen as poor practices in teaching, which teachers are generally advised to avoid in favour of more student-led approaches.

Nonetheless, educational dichotomies have long been criticised as ‘responsible for the development of restrictive pedagogic ideologies’ (Alexander et al (1992) cited in Jeffrey and Craft 2004: 1) and it could be argued that a false dichotomy in educational discourse has become formed between ‘traditional’ didactic or instructive teaching, where the teacher transmits knowledge to students, and active, creative approaches to learning. As amply demonstrated by Bleiman’s (2017) classroom observations, in practice, teachers seldom use a single style of teaching alone, using instead a repertoire of approaches that make the learning accessible for most students. It may be that the key to students’ understanding lies in getting the balance of approaches right for the class we have in front of us.

### **The research project**

The research project was designed to explore students’ responses to a variety of approaches to teaching *Macbeth* and an extract from Stevenson’s *The Body Snatcher* over the course of two consecutive half-terms. Although the research design was not ideal, as the teaching approaches were applied to two different text types (a complete play and a prose extract); the project has nevertheless proved worthwhile as it has given me greater insight into my students’ experiences of our lessons, which will lead to improved practice in the future.

The sample was a mixed-gender, mid-ability Year 9 class of 31 students in a comprehensive school in the rural East Midlands of England. I taught two one-hour

lessons every week and another English teacher taught on two different days.

Between us we covered *Macbeth* in its entirety during one eight-week half-term, with each teacher dovetailing close-reading and language analysis of particular scenes in class time. This was supported by watching Polanski's 1971 film in my colleague's lesson and supplemented by summaries of scenes set as homework reading, which were then discussed in class prior to moving on.

Both teachers worked with extracts from different gothic texts for the Gothic Scheme of Work (SoW) during the following half-term, as required by the department curriculum plan. Lessons were emergent, depending on the needs of the students and my evolving research design, but ultimately were dictated by the requirement to ensure students were fully prepared for the demands of the end of half-term assessments.

Throughout the case study I monitored student responses through a range of data gathering techniques. These included visual representations, ~~of previous English lessons,~~ questionnaires, interviews and documentary analysis of students' work, in an effort to produce the suitably thick description associated with qualitative case study research. I have taken an interpretivist approach to the project where 'the methodological approach is based on interpreting the views and experiences of the students' (Wilson 2013: 21), whilst being 'constructively thoughtful' about my own subjectivities as a teacher and researcher (Counsell, in Wilson 2013: 312). ~~as I attempt to make sense of my students' perceptions of our lessons, whilst acknowledging that my 'insider' status, as one of the two usual English teachers of the class, might afford me some insights that I may not have recognised as significant at the time.~~

## **Students' previous experiences of English lessons**

Prior to beginning my research proper, I carried out two activities in class in order to ascertain a general sense of the 'character' of the class, and students' prior experiences, opinions and levels of confidence in studying different aspects of English. The first of these was to have students create visual representations to depict previous experiences of English lessons. The artefacts were based on Gabrielle Cliff Hodges' 'Rivers of Reading', a collage-making activity used to encourage 'habitual and committed readers [to] reflect on their own personal reading histories and bring the subject of reading to the forefront of their attention' (Cliff Hodges 2010: 187). The creation of visual artefacts has been said to stimulate discussion and provide rich data for analysis, leading to 'deeper insight into ...problem areas of English' (Wood 2016:17).

29 students created a visual representation which illustrated their prior experiences of English lessons from primary school to Year 8, with a focus on what they did and did not enjoy. The two examples below are representative of student responses to the task. Jed used emojis to illustrate his changing feelings about the subject and credits studying Shakespeare with turning him off English, whilst Anna's artefact gives a more general overview of her likes and dislikes about various aspects of the subject.

### **Figure 1: Jed's artefact**

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**Figure 2: Anna's artefact**

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The comments written on the artefacts were ~~coded~~ manually coded for patterns and general themes relating to experiences of English lessons by using a spreadsheet for themes, an analysis of which is represented below:

**Table 1:** Data collected from Visual Artefact1 (21/09/15) and coded into categories

Insert here

It can be seen that generally, students in this class made many more positive comments about their English lessons than they did negative. The positive comments about reading and writing were often specified as activities experienced during primary school, and overall the class stated they enjoyed creative writing and drama. A significant minority disliked studying Shakespeare and reading generally, whilst writing Point, Evidence, Explain paragraphs (PEE, a paragraph structure designed to encourage students to analyse quotations) was considered as the most unpopular activity in English lessons, which is clear to see in Jed and Anna's artefacts.

Because a significant minority of students had written negative comments about reading, I administered a numerical survey (Appendix 1) designed to gain further details of their affective response to this activity. The questions were designed to gauge students' confidence in reading particular text types. Students were invited to circle the most appropriate response, with numbers allocated as follows:

- 1 = not at all [confident]
- 2 = hardly at all [confident]
- 3 = quite confident
- 4 = very confident
- 5 = extremely confident

This survey did not ask students to give reasons for the way they responded to the questions, but their responses are suggestive. Students reported most confidence in reading and understanding a book that they had chosen themselves (Q1). This confidence might be due to their reading books in isolation, which means their interpretations have never been challenged, and they have not been 'pushed to rethink what they first assumed' (Lemov 2016: 47). Students reported good levels of confidence in reading modern fiction books ~~read~~-in school (Q2) and newspapers and magazines they had chosen themselves (Q8). They reported reasonable confidence in reading and understanding 'old-fashioned' stories in English lessons (Q3). (For the purpose of the survey the term 'old-fashioned' was used instead of pre-twentieth century as my pilot study with a Year 8 class of similar ability revealed that they found the term 'pre-twentieth century' confusing and they themselves used the term 'old-fashioned'.) The area of least confidence that students reported was studying 'old-fashioned' plays, for example Shakespeare (Q5). -Put together, the results of these surveys suggest that student enjoyment of reading is related to their

confidence in understanding and interpreting the text. There is a direct relation between understanding and enjoyment.

**Table 2:** Data collected from [Numerical Survey](#): Confidence in Reading [Numerical Survey](#) (09/11/15)

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In line with the survey results that revealed a lack of enjoyment of “old-fashioned” plays, students responded with a loud groan on being informed they were to study *Macbeth* for the coming half-term. In order to ascertain why they responded so negatively, I next collected data in the form of a second visual image where students charted their previous experiences of studying Shakespeare. I was interested in the comments they would write around the images and make verbally as they worked, reasoning that these would give a more accurate reflection of the intended meanings, rather than my own analysis of the drawn images.

Having students create visual artefacts as a kind of self-reflection task encourages rich discussion and stimulates them to remember things they may have previously forgotten. This sort of activity can be said to perform as a form of advance organiser, which are devices that activate relevant background knowledge. As Avery reminds us: ‘Educational psychology research suggests that meaningful learning occurs when new information is related to pre-existing cognitive concepts in a nonverbatim and nonarbitrary fashion’ (Avery 2011:146). Thus, the idea was not only to give me some insight into students’ previous Shakespeare lessons as both teacher and researcher, but also to activate their previous experiences so that they had something to ‘hook’ the new learning onto.

Iona used printed images associated with Shakespeare to illustrate her artefact. In research terms, she could be described as an 'outlier' as she was the only student who had ever seen a play and was the only one who attended a drama group. Her artefact revealed that although she generally had a positive attitude towards acting, if she felt under pressure to perform she lost pleasure in it.

**Figure 3: Iona's artefact**

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Bertie's artefact revealed a negative attitude towards studying Shakespeare which was more typical of the class. He stated that in Year 8 "The Midsummer Night's Dream acting was fun, but quite boring at the same time because its Shakespeare." Crucially, his last comment acknowledges, "I do not understand Shakespeare."

**Figure 4: Bertie's artefact**

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The completed visual artefacts revealed that only one student had any memory of studying Shakespeare in primary school: he was a new student who had recently joined the school from another area of the country. ~~Further, only one girl~~The information that; Iona, was the only student who had ~~ever~~ seen a play ~~before~~ and ~~she was the only one who~~ attended a drama group. ~~This information~~ was important as it revealed a lack of cultural capital (Bourdieu: 1986) which might go some way to

explaining why students did not value studying Shakespeare. The canonical status of Shakespeare's plays combined with students' lack of familiarity with them meant that students were not confident enough to make the plays their own in the way that Gibson advocates (Gibson 1998: 4) and subsequently they viewed the study of Shakespeare as irrelevant. As Bertie wrote on his artefact, "In my opinion I do not think Shakespeare is important." -To compound this, we did not have a drama department in school so any interest in dramaperformance beyond English lessons had to be explored externally.

The entire year group had completed a half-term's scheme of work on 'An Introduction to Shakespeare' in Year 7, although evidence from the visual artefacts revealed that few students remembered much about it. What they did remember specifically was a creative activity of making witches' cauldrons, but that may have been prompted by there being some examples on display on the classroom walls. Further, the thing students remembered most about a Year 7 trip to the Globe Theatre was that it was a long journey on the coach, and nobody mentioned the drama activities they had engaged in whilst there. There was an obvious and disconcerting disconnect between what I thought students knew already, and what they actually remembered.

I used open coding coded to theme the sentiments written on the Shakespeare visual artefacts ~~into themes~~ and although it can be seen that seven students enjoyed acting-performing a Shakespeare play in Year 8, ~~but that~~ overall there were 36 negative comments made about Shakespeare, with over 50% of the comments including the word 'boring'; this was despite the fact that the Year 7 SoW had

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consisted of mainly creative activities, and in Year 8 there had been a focus on drama activities which enabled all students to ~~practice~~ practise scenes outside on hot days. It was interesting to note that, although there were 21 positive comments about drama in the initial visual representation of English lessons in primary and secondary school, drama associated with Shakespeare was less well received, as exemplified by Bertie's comment on his artefact, "The Midsummer Night's Dream acting was fun, but quite boring at the same time because it's Shakespeare."

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**-Table 3:** Data collected from Visual Artefact 2 (11/1/16) and coded into categories

Insert here

~~As Because~~ my students' ~~aversion-antipathy towards~~ Shakespeare appeared to be rooted in difficulties with understanding the language, I designed lessons largely using teaching approaches that might be positioned at the teacher-centred 'command style' end of Mosston and Ashworth's (2008) continuum. I used a very focused instructional style to ensure that students understood the language of the scenes we were reading, and were confident in their understanding of the characters and their actions before we moved on. This was achieved through slowing down the reading, and spending longer on exposition than I would normally have done in my desire to get on to the more 'active' -parts of the lesson.

Because students had little memory of studying Shakespeare from earlier years, drawing on advice in Haddon (2009) I spent an entire lesson on explaining

Shakespearean contractions and the usage of more common archaic words such as 'thee' and 'thou' before we started reading the text. I also modelled how to close read a speech by directly telling students \_which words to highlight on their copies and how to annotate them. I focussed on words that I knew from my previous experiences of teaching *Macbeth* were likely to cause significant difficulties and misconceptions for students. These are approaches that could be said to be following Friere's 'banking' model. Following our discussion of the visual artefacts, my colleague also spent longer on explaining the text in greater detail than he normally would and dedicated a lesson to explaining iambic pentameter and blank verse. These didactic approaches to lessons may appear antithetical to the active methodologies to teaching Shakespeare which recommend getting students engaged with a drama-based methodology (Rex-Gibson 1998) that have been enormously influential in teaching in the UK. Similar to Fordham's (2016) experience, initially I felt guilty about teaching in such a way. However, I learned from some of Gibson's 'active' approaches to teaching early modern dramatic metre (1998: 68) that it is important to have students physically experience the rhythm of the verse lines in order to help them to find effective ways to match the rhythm to the thoughts and feelings of the ~~and~~ characters. And, as students appeared engaged and responsive, I maintained the teacher-led approach to subsequent lessons. This included reading the text out loud in class, either as a whole class or with students in small groups, punctuated by much teacher questioning and explication to mitigate the risk of misunderstanding; an example of the complex continuum of pedagogies that occur within what I have called a teacher-led approach and comparable to Bleiman's (2017) findings.

### **Responses to Shakespeare lessons**

At the end of the *Macbeth* scheme of work, four volunteer students were interviewed about their experiences of the lessons. Volunteers were used as this was the most ethically acceptable way of being assured of their informed consent. However, as Cohen, Manion and Morrison remind us, 'In these cases one has to be very cautious in making any claims for generalisability or representativeness' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011:160). The students who volunteered cannot be taken as being representative of the whole class as by volunteering they demonstrated a desire to contribute to the research project and an intrinsic engagement with their learning processes which was atypical of the class. Further, it must be recognised that I am reporting on students' reflections of lessons that they experienced some weeks prior to interview.

The aim of the interview was to try to ascertain which, if any, of the Shakespeare teaching interventions students perceived as having had an impact on their confidence in reading *Macbeth*. Their comments indicate that they viewed continued practice at reading the play out loud to be important in helping them to become more familiar with the language. Again, what may appear a highly formal method is supported by Gibson (1998: 86\*\*) and it is likely that hearing the rhythm of the language enabled the students to 'tune in' to the pronunciation of unfamiliar words. Students also commented on the positive effect of watching video extracts which helped them to visualise how a character might be enacted and a later interview revealed that this was helpful because it enabled them to fill in any gaps in their knowledge.

*Jemima:* I think I can read it better because I understand it.

*Faith:* It's easier to understand.

*Richard:* Yeah I can understand the language more.

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*Russ:* Yeah I understand it as well.  
*Jemima:* At the beginning we had to read it out...  
*Faith:* ...in front of the class.  
*Jemima:* It became easier as lessons went on.

*Res:* Which lessons did we do that helped you to feel more confident with the language?  
*Faith:* Where we did the definitions of the like "thou", "art".  
*Richard:* Watching the movie clips.  
*Jemima:* We had to read it out in class as well.  
*Faith:* And the speech, you had to highlight bits and quote little bits.  
*Jemima:* The scene, we watched the scene, remember the lesson when we highlighted it, we watched the scene and that was really helpful because you could see how she actually acted when she was sort of ... mad.  
*Faith:* And the bit where we had to stick the page across the double spread and then you had to highlight it.  
*Russ:* Oh, and the clip when she's hallucinating.  
*Jemima:* Yeah that's the clip I mean.

~~*Res:* — So when I went through that extract with you, was that a really~~

The four students interviewed responded positively to the teacher-led my-approach to language analysis of telling students specifically which line of text to highlight and explaining what the words mean in modern day language. However, the question, "So when I went through that extract with you, was that a really useful way of doing it?" was deeply loaded and therefore the value of responses to it are compromised. However, and in a later interview with different students this activity received the same positive reactions, so I am confident that students benefitted from the activity.

### **Student responses to the gothic lessons**

Gothic lessons were planned using a range of what Mosston and Ashworth (2008) describe as 'discovery' teaching styles, with students being allowed greater freedom to use creative learning activities as a means of exploring the text. ~~I assumed~~ Sstudents would be familiar with gothic conventions from their exposure to horror films, and some computer games and other aspects of popular culture, so it

~~would be~~was relatively simple to link the learning to what they ~~already know~~ already ~~the genre as more relevant and were initially more receptive than they had been with the Shakespeare lessons, possibly because they were more confident that they would better understand the texts to be studied in the first place.~~

Following an initial 'command-style' introduction to what I considered to be the key gothic concepts, and after watching the short animation of *The Sandman* (Dir. Paul Berry: 1991), students' first creative response to the genre was to write a version of *The Sandman* as a children's story. The aim of the activity was that ~~students~~ ~~tudents~~ would be better able to understand the effects of gothic conventions they came across in *The Body Snatcher* ~~having~~ already used them in their own writing. Although only a short amount of time was spent on this activity, students' written responses demonstrated that the majority had a good grasp of the main gothic conventions of isolation; obscurity; pathetic fallacy; the monstrous ~~and~~; the importance of fear; ~~and~~ and were able to use them in their own writing as illustrated in the example ~~below~~ from a student in the middle of the ability range ~~below~~:

Once upon a time on a dark stormy night. The August wind howled through the leaves outside the lonely home.

Crack! Shivering from fear he gets to his room. A small bed with black covers stood in the center of the room. An equal distance from the door and the window.

Shadows stretch all around the room like fingers trying to reach for him. Crack, his windows open as a howl sound came through. The clouds moved to become a ghostly face.

This is when the Sandman materializes halfway up the staircase. He jumps on the steps causing them to shudder and squeal in protest. All while this happens his mother is looking after him. Getting him to sleep without terror. He then sleeps peacefully.

(Written by Anna)

On the strength of these written responses I anticipated that students would be able to recognise key gothic techniques when they saw them in extracts of *The Body Snatcher*, and that with practice they should later be able to write analytically about the effects on the reader.

I reasoned that concentrating on one extract only from *The Body Snatcher* would allow more time for creative exploration which should result in a deeper understanding. As Biggs and Tang point out, 'Deep engagement in a task takes time. If you don't provide time, you won't get deep engagement' (2011: 43). Student responses to the confidence in reading numerical survey (Table 2) suggested that there would be fewer difficulties with understanding the language than there had been with the Shakespeare. Therefore I did not explain the nuances of the language and characterisation in the same amount of detail I had with *Macbeth*, but instead designed lessons where students would explore the characters independently through writing and acting their own play script. Students' first visual artefacts had demonstrated a preference for creative writing and I anticipated that a transformational writing activity would appeal to them as a means of getting them engaged with the story. However, one of the particular challenges inherent in this approach is the prerequisite for a solid understanding of the base text, which meant that ultimately this approach was not as successful as I had anticipated. As ~~However,~~ Biggs and Tang ~~also~~ point out ~~that,~~ in order to access deep learning approaches, students require 'a sound foundation of relevant prior knowledge' (~~2011~~ ~~ibid.~~:26). Hattie's research has also demonstrated the least effective teaching methods seem to be those that 'focus too much on deep to the detriment of first attending to surface knowledge' (2012: 94). By moving straight on to creative activities I had not ensured that students had the necessary background knowledge

to enable them to benefit from these methods, as became apparent from students' poorly executed work and their subsequent interview responses.

### **Comparing approaches to Shakespeare and gothic lessons**

As a means of ensuring I had a clear understanding of students' perceptions of their lessons, I carried out a second audio-recorded interview following the gothic scheme of work, which I viewed as the most important data source. Volunteer students were asked to reflect upon their experiences of both schemes of work, with a focus on which activities they perceived as having best helped them to understand the texts. As already noted, there are particular problems associated with using volunteers for interviews; this time around half the class agreed to be recorded and they were representative of the class as a whole in terms of the gender mix and ability range.

The picture that emerged was that most students stated they had initially felt more confident with the gothic text because, as anticipated, they were already familiar with the genre. As Anna told me, "Most films are about, like crime, so we're used to it." Further, they found the language more accessible:

- Brendan:* Easiest to read to begin with.  
*Jed:* Because it's more modern.  
*Richard:* I don't know why... 'cause it's actual English.  
*Will:* It's more modern.  
*Faith:* The language was easier as well, because *Macbeth* was Shakespeare so I couldn't understand it.

However, despite their initial confidence with understanding the language of *The Body Snatcher*, around half of the students recorded also reported that they were more confident in writing about Lady Macbeth in the half term assessment than they were with writing about the gothic extract:

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*Res:* What did we do with *Macbeth* that made it easier for you to understand and feel more confident with it?

*Brendan:* We spent more time on it.

*Richard:* Spent more effort on it!

*Jed:* Kept reviewing it.

*Mark:* I understood the storyline more.

*Brendan:* Read the whole story, 'cause in [the other teacher's] lessons we just read it ... you needed to read it to understand it ... so I'm glad that we read it.

*Jemima:* In *Macbeth* we highlighted the sheet, that was useful as we could go back and see which ones we highlighted so we knew what to look for and what to write about.

Here Brendan repeats the importance of reading the whole play in aiding his understanding of it. This time without prompting, Jemima again talks about the value of the lesson where I guided students to highlight and annotate the text. Most students reported that that particular lesson aided their understanding of the language which supported the data gathered from the initial audio-recorded interview. Further, students' highlighted sheet provided a helpful resource for them to refer to in their assessment. Conversely, a creative insult generating activity was perceived as fun but not really very helpful in aiding understanding of the language, probably because it was not directly linked to the play. This activity might have been improved by relating it to the characters, for example by imagining what Lady Macbeth might say to Lady Macduff.

Unexpectedly, students also reported enjoyment of a lesson where they worked in groups on PEE paragraphs about Lady Macbeth, which contradicted statements written on the first visual artefact (Table 1) where they expressed dislike of ~~that~~-this structure. Previous research has also demonstrated that students have an aversion to the restrictions of the PEE format ([Wood 2016: 10-xxxxxx](#)), which McCallum describes as a potentially limiting practice (2012: 116). Further questioning revealed

that it was the collaboration and sharing of ideas in the group work part of the activity that was found to be helpful in improving students' understanding of the character, demonstrating Kwakman's (2002) definition of learning as a collaborative activity and the importance of shared discussion to challenge assumptions and clarify meaning (Lemov 2016):

*Jemima:* We got everyone's ideas from the group – then read it out to the class so you got to see what everyone else had said.

It is important to note that students had already had much teacher-led input to aid their understanding of the character of Lady Macbeth prior to the group work activity, which meant they were able to discuss and explore their ideas about her further in a confident and non-threatening way.

The emergent picture was that those students who were engaged with the Shakespeare lessons reported liking the more teacher-led approach to the nuances of the language. They perceived an improvement in their ability to understand the language and could write confidently about Lady Macbeth as a result. Students also linked this increase in confidence to having read the entire play and knowing the whole story, which enabled a better understanding of the character.

All students recorded added that they would have enjoyed being able to act some of *Macbeth*, particularly the hallucination scene. This is in contrast to their initial responses to drama based on Shakespeare (Table 3) and further illustrates their confidence in understanding the character of Lady Macbeth. I believe the instructional approaches taken to language analysis led to a greater understanding of the character which meant students would have been confident in being able to explore more deeply her inner workings by physically embodying her.

Watching the entire film of *Macbeth* (Dir. Polanski: 1971) was also said to be helpful as it meant students were able to understand the whole story:

- Jed:* We kept reviewing it and watched the film.  
*Brendan:* The film helped quite a lot...  
*Richard:* I like watching films...  
*Brendan:* I know the film's not exact but it does sort of like... You get a bit stuck on 'What happened there?' You watch the film... and it helps.  
*Anna:* I actually find it easier when we watch like clips or like part of a movie 'cause I sort of find it easier to sort of like understand the story and what the ...  
*Melanie:* ...I like clips  
*Becky:* I'm quite a visual learner so I have to see things... I liked watching the clips.  
*Anna:* I liked watching clips or part of the movie, I find it easier to understand.

Students watched the film in my colleague's lesson in extracts of around 20 minutes over the course of the half term. He told me that the significant differences between the film and the text were discussed as part of the lesson, however I am not able to comment on how this was done as I did not ask for greater detail at the time. Student responses point to the value of seeing Shakespeare's plays in performance, an area that has not been touched upon in this project.

In contrast, students felt that focussing on only one extract from *The Body Snatcher* was not very helpful:

- Brendan:* It didn't really make sense because we only did one part of it.

Brendan's point here is important as it implies that some students need to know and understand the entire narrative before they can make sense of or 'close-read' an extract, which supports Biggs and Tang's (2011: 26) view that students need to

understand the big picture before they can engage with deep approaches to learning. Whilst I had given the class an overview of the story of *The Body Snatcher* prior to reading the extract, on reflection I had clearly not gone into enough detail.

In this case, spending longer on reading and explication of *The Body Snatcher* and less time on creative activities may have led to greater understanding of the text and subsequent willingness to engage in the creative script-writing and drama activities.

Students reported that reading only extracts from gothic texts led to confusion because they did not understand the whole story. They were unable to see where the extract fitted into the narrative, or to predict and make sense of the storyline in ways that more experienced or sophisticated readers are able to do. This finding ~~indicates the importance of students' having a good understanding of the entire story in order to be able to carry out a close reading of an extract, and~~ signposts the need for students to have studied and understood entire texts prior to sitting their English Literature GCSE when they will be assessed on their answers to both whole texts and extracts.

~~Therefore, the importance of students' reading the whole story should not be underestimated, even if they are only 'required' to read extracts. In this case, spending longer on reading and explication of *The Body Snatcher* and less time on creative activities may have led to greater understanding of the text and subsequent willingness to engage in the creative script-writing and drama activities.~~

## **Conclusions and discussion**

A majority of students reported an increase in confidence in understanding the language of *Macbeth* after having participated in the more 'command-style' lessons used to teach it. This finding supports Biggs and Tang's (2011) and Hattie's (2012)

view that students need to have a degree of surface understanding before they are confident to take the risks associated with more creative, deeper learning activities, such as the group discussion around PEE paragraphs and enactment. This has implications for the way we teach pre-twentieth century texts at our school, where we have traditionally privileged drama-based methodology and student enjoyment in an attempt to avoid boredom; an approach which, based on student responses on visual artefact 2 (Table 3) has clearly not been successful. Paying greater attention to students' difficulties with understanding the language prior to engaging with creative methods of teaching seems important in approaching challenging pre-twentieth century texts.

The interventions trialled for this project are not sufficient to draw broad conclusions about the objective impact on academic improvements in students' attainment grades brought about by either teacher-led or active approaches to teaching. It is for each teacher to critically assess the validity of particular teaching strategies appropriate to the students they have in front of them. Like Fordham (2016), I have realised that teacher-led instruction is 'a perfectly legitimate approach to teaching'.<sup>25</sup> Within my Year 9 class, the positive effects of 'command-style' approaches to teaching Shakespeare's language were that they led to students' willingness to engage with more creative activities. As can be seen from the negative responses to the creative gothic lessons, whilst it is important for students to have access to creative lessons to deepen their understanding of texts, it is also crucial for some students that they feel supported by a degree of explicit instruction on the text and the genre, so that they can engage in and benefit from ~~in~~ the creative lessons which follow.

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Appendix 1

*Pre-twentieth century literature in the Year 9 classroom: Student responses to different teaching approaches (v.3.1)*

Year 9 Confidence in English Questionnaire 1

Name.....

Please answer the following questions about your confidence in learning activities in English by giving marks out of 5, where 5 is the most confident and 1 is not at all confident.

- 1 = not at all
- 2 = hardly at all
- 3 = quite confident
- 4 = very confident
- 5 = extremely confident

Reading & Understanding

Please answer the questions by circling one number only.

- 1) How confident are you at reading and understanding a book you have chosen to read yourself?  
1 2 3 4 5
- 2) How confident are you at reading and understanding modern fiction books given to you in English lessons? (e.g. *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*)  
1 2 3 4 5
- 3) How confident are you at reading and understanding old fashioned stories given to you in English lessons?  
1 2 3 4 5
- 4) How confident are you at reading and understanding modern plays given to you in English lessons?  
1 2 3 4 5
- 5) How confident are you at reading and understanding old fashioned plays (e.g. Shakespeare) given to you in English lessons?  
1 2 3 4 5
- 6) How confident are you at reading and understanding modern poetry given to you in English lessons?  
1 2 3 4 5
- 7) How confident are you at reading and understanding old fashioned poetry given to you in English lessons?  
1 2 3 4 5
- 8) How confident are you at reading and understanding a newspaper or magazine of your own choice?  
1 2 3 4 5
- 9) How confident are you at reading and understanding modern non-fiction or factual accounts?  
1 2 3 4 5
- 10) How confident are you at reading and understanding old fashioned non-fiction or factual accounts?  
1 2 3 4 5

Please write in the box anything you would like me to know about how you feel about reading in general.