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Using theatrical masks to transform second language-learning for engineering students

A performative, enactive and co-creative approach to languaging

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Abstract

This article describes how a transdisciplinary module for engineering students, based on masked theatre workshops set within an enactive pedagogical framework (Trocmé-Fabre, 2022; Varela, 1999) combines a sensorimotor and reflexive (bottom-up and top-down) approach to English language learning and translanguaging (Aden, 2014). Through a process of devising and performing a masked play, students at a top engineering school in France can develop specific human-centric skills to help them mediate, collaborate and co-create within increasingly complex professional situations involving diverse perspectives. Grounded in Varela's paradigm of enaction (Varela & al., 1993), and the mask pedagogy of Lecoq (1997, 2002) and Gaulier (2024), the students undertake a phenomenological, embodied exploration using first neutral then expressive masks. As well as covering the face, or identity (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p 37), masks disrupt habitual modes of sensorimotor perception, as visual input is dramatically reduced and other modes of perception increase to compensate, thereby altering relations to self, others and the environment (Preller, 2022). Masks are potent catalysts for transformation and creative freedom, as evidenced by their importance in actor-training and performance (Freixe, 2024; Lecoq, 1997; Mnouchkine, 2000). With non-actors – here, engineering students learning a second language - I aim to show how three key features of mask-work enable a creative approach to languaging, meaning-making and knowledge-building.

Résumé

Cet article décrit un module transdisciplinaire basé sur des ateliers de théâtre de masque qui s'inscrit dans une approche énactive de la connaissance (Trocmé-Fabre, 2022 ; Varela, 1999). Il s'adresse à des étudiants d'une grande école d'ingénieur française et croise une approche sensorimotrice et réflexive (bottom-up and top-down) de l'apprentissage de l'anglais et du « translanguager » (Aden 2017). Le processus de conception, d'écriture et de représentation d'une pièce de théâtre masqué permet aux étudiants de développer des compétences transversales de médiation, de collaboration et de co-création nécessaires dans l'exercice de situations professionnelles de plus en plus complexes. S'appuyant sur le paradigme énactif (Varela & al.,1993) et la pédagogie du masque de Lecoq (1997) et Gaulier (2024), les étudiants entreprennent une exploration phénoménologique et incarnée du masque neutre et du

masque expressif. Non seulement les masques dissimulent le visage et l'identité (Lakoff & Johnson, 1987) mais ils modifient les modes habituels de perception sensorimotrice. La perception visuelle est considérablement réduite, elle est alors compensée par d'autres modes de perception, ce qui transforme la qualité de relation aux autres, à soi et à l'environnement (Preller, 2022). Les masques sont de puissants catalyseurs de transformation et de liberté créatrice comme en témoigne leur importance dans la formation des acteurs (Freixe, 2024 ; Lecoq, 1997 ; Mnouchkine, 2000). Avec des non-acteurs - ici, des étudiants ingénieurs qui apprennent l'anglais - je montre comment trois caractéristiques clés du travail de masque suscitent une approche créative du "translangager", de l'élaboration du sens et de la construction des connaissances.

1 Introduction

"All doing is knowing, all knowing is doing"

Maturana & Varela (1987, p26)

How does a performative, enactive and co-creative approach to languaging using theatrical masks transform a language learning experience for engineering students?

Faced with the massive geopolitical, climate-related, technological and economic transformations occurring today (ref. Unesco agenda 2030), as well as the rapidity of social and societal changes (Rosa, 2013), students, and in particular, engineering students, will be tasked with developing strategies and solutions to deal with increasing complexity, (Morin, 1999) competing needs and resource management, as well as imagining sustainable paths forward. Therefore, students will need to become aware of multiple perspectives, be able to accept uncertainty and change, think in flexible ways, overcome obstacles and create together. I aim to show how a series of mask workshops, using a creative, reflexive approach, based on the pedagogy of Lecoq (1997) and Gaulier (2024) and grounded in an enactive pedagogical framework (Aden, 2017, Trocmé-Fabre, 2022), develop precisely these skills because of the specific characteristics of mask-work.

I will summarise the foundational theory drawn from mask pedagogy and practice, phenomenology and enaction, justify the pedagogical choice of masks, and give a brief overview of the structure of the module. I will then analyse specific exercises in relation to three key features of mask-work, using examples of students' verbatim and phenomenological writing as data in order to show how this work transforms language-learning into a translanguaging process (Aden & Eschenauer, 2020), where students accept change and not knowing, overcome obstacles and undertake creative work together on their learning journey.

2 Foundational theory

The enactive paradigm (Varela & al., 1993) reveals the fundamental circularity (structural coupling) and interconnectedness of all living systems, in a way which transcends dualism, integrating both subject and object as part of a dynamic process of co-determination and co-creation. As humans, "it is by languaging that the act of knowing brings forth a world constituted in language in a continuous becoming that we bring forth with others" (Maturana & Varela, 1987 p 234). This dynamic process is rooted in our biology; we interact with each other and with our surroundings. Perceiving, acting, being affected by, affecting, and understanding are inextricably intertwined, although mainly outside our conscious awareness (Damasio, 2021; Lakoff & Gallese, 2005). Rooted in phenomenology (Husserl, 1931; Merleau-Ponty, 1976), Varela emphasizes how knowledge cannot be separated from our evolving, living, embodied being:

> La connaissance dépend d'un monde inséparable de nos corps, de notre langage et de notre histoire culturelle – bref, de notre corporéité**.** Knowledge depends on a world which is inseparable from our bodies, languages and cultural biographies – in short, from our embodiment. (Varela & al., 1993, p. 210), (author's translation).

An enactive pedagogical framework (Aden, 2017; Trocmé-Fabre, 2022; Varela, 1999) starts with sensorimotor exploration and creation, which leads to reflection and communication, enacting a bottom-up, top-down dynamic circularity. It grounds learning in bodily presence and connection, as do aesthetic performative practices.

Over the last 20 years, research carried out on enactive performative transdisciplinary approaches to language-learning through drama (Aden, 2014; Eschenauer, 2018) and dance (Castelo, 2024), have revealed the many benefits, reporting increased confidence, improved psychosocial and communication skills, capacity to change perspective, as well as increased languaging skills (Aden, 2010, 2017; Eschenauer, 2018). "Languaging" here is the enactive process (Maturana & Varela, 1987) referring to the ability to use, combine and adapt all the languages at our disposal (verbal, linguistic, non-verbal, gestural and paraverbal, among others), in order to communicate. According to Aden (2014, p115) "the capacity to translanguage is the dynamic act of connecting to self, others and to the surroundings, which constantly generates shared meaning" (author's translation). It is a creative act. But what is the added value of using masks in language-learning?

2.1 Three key features of mask-work

2.1.1 Disruption and learning

Wearing a mask disrupts our habitual ways of perceiving and acting (Brook, 1988; Freixe, 2010, 2024; Lecoq, 1997). How? A mask alters our body, and our perception of it, by reducing our visual field, generating compensatory increases in other sensorimotor modes of perception (Preller, 2022). Our body responds to the mask and it is not something we consciously decide to do. As Brook says: "just put a bit of white paper on an actor's face and say 'now, look around - suddenly he realises he has a body' " (Brook, 1988, p. 219). Try it and see!

This translates as an immediate heightened awareness of proprioception (perception of our own body in space), as well as a heightening of all other senses, such as auditory and vestibular (our sense of orientation), all of which have up until then been seamlessly working outside of our conscious awareness to organise our body to carry out what we need to do. We habitually do not pay attention to our body in this way to focus our attention efficiently on whatever is demanding our focus (Feldman-Barrett, 2018; Lachaux & Petitmengin, 2013).

Suddenly we have a spotlight on what has been most of the time unconscious, namely, how our whole body – brain – sensorimotor system organises itself in space in order to move and act and communicate with each other. Urgently, we need to adapt our self-organisation, to enable us to walk, move and act, with the added difficulty of a mask. There is a parallel with the way we learn. Learning a new skill or concept can initially throw us off kilter because we are not used to acting/doing/perceiving/thinking in the ways this new skill or concept or other phenomenon requires; we have to reassess what we know, and mobilise all our resources to test and validate this knowledge adapt our acting/doing/perceiving/thinking, in order for it to become assimilated – incorporated, even mastered. Disruption, then, is part of exploring the world, and leads to creative adaptations and learning.

Yet, just as much learning happens in childhood through play (Piaget, 1945; Vygotsky 1966, 2016), too much disruption – when our threat response is activated – can obstruct memory and learning. In a pedagogical context, a fear of failure can be paralysing. In the work, as well as using games regularly to prepare for playing, a clearly defined time and space and an attentive, non-judgemental environment mitigate the anxiety generated by the inherent disruption and uncertainty of the learning (and teaching) process.

What is the effect of this disruption on our sensorimotor system caused by the mask? If we want to improve our diction, we can put a pen between our teeth and practise speaking. The added obstacle of the pen deforms the sounds we make, forcing us to find ways of creating the sounds we aspire to. We become aware of the muscles used to articulate words, because

they are working harder. Once we remove the pen, and repeat the text, the words are much more clearly enunciated. Likewise, wearing a mask, we experience heightened awareness of our proprioception, our hearing, our vestibular system, all of our senses which have been mobilised to compensate for our loss of vision, visio-spatial awareness, and our hidden face. We start to understand how we create meaning using our whole bodies, and not just linguistically.

When we learn our first language as babies/infants, we do so through whole body sensorimotor exploration: moving, touching, doing, hearing and imitating; through this, we build knowledge and make meaning. When we learn a second language after the window of enormous plasticity and mobility that occurs in the first few years of infancy, we find the sounds and rhythms and shapes of the language are harder to make, as our mouths have not been formed to make them. Losing our accent becomes effortful. So, there are parallels between wearing a mask, and learning a second language, as both require us to change our habitual patterns of relating, listening, doing and speaking. In this sense, a second language is a mask. As mask pedagogue Guy Freixe writes: “In mask work, the actor rediscovers the strength of a movement, and the impact of attitudes, as if he’s speaking a foreign language” (Freixe, 2018, p.35), (author’s translation).

2.1.2 Distance-taking from the self

Putting on a mask also covers our face, which Lakoff & Johnson label as a metaphor for our identity (Lakoff & Johnson, 1987). Indeed, the ancient Greek word for mask means both “mask” and “face” (Meineck, p. 69, Ed Kemp & McConachie, 2019). In this way, “Freed from his own subjectivity” (Brook, 1988, p219), the actor can experience a disinhibiting, creative freedom (Brook, 1988; Freixe, 2010; Gaulier, 2024). For Lecoq (1997, p.89) “Through mask work, students have learned not to play *themselves*, but to play *using* themselves. This is the ambiguity of the actor’s work.” The distance between the actor and the role leads to an actor’s empathy for her character (Gallagher & Gallagher, 2020) and is made visible through the physical object of the mask. Mask-work leads to perspective-changing (Aden & Preller, 2020), especially spatial perspective-taking (Preller, 2022), which is a feature of empathy (Thirioux & Berthoz, 2010). Perspective-taking and empathy facilitate both language-learning (Aden, 2010; Eschenauer, 2018) and creativity (Kaufman, Glaveanu & Sternberg, 2019 p. 736).

2.1.3 Double focus of attention

A third salient characteristic of mask-work is the way in which our attention is altered. In fact, the small holes for the eyes in a mask, draw our eyes to a point of focus, while simultaneously increasing our focus on the space surrounding our body as well as on what we are hearing.

This leads to an Altered State of Consciousness, which, according to Johnstone (1999), is like trance. Lösel (2019, in Kemp & McConachie, Eds, p. 42), illustrates this state of double focus of attention in Figure 1:

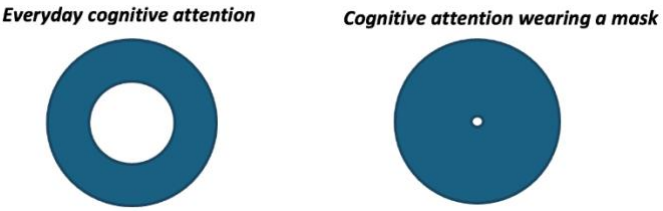


Figure 1: Double Focus of Attention (Adapted from Lösel) in R. Kemp & B. McConachie, (Eds.), 2019, (p. 42)

A double focus of attention is also characteristic of empathy: "empathy occurs when we suspend our single-minded focus of intention, and instead adopt a double-minded focus of attention" (Baron-Cohen, 2011 p. 11).

Therefore, the disruption to the sensorimotor system caused by wearing a mask and covering the face generates a distance-taking from the self and a double focus of attention, rooted in present-moment awareness. Creatively adapting to these disruptions enables learning.

3 Methodology

The methodology used is arts-based research, both by interweaving the three different perspectives of mask practitioner/performer, teacher and researcher (Belliveau, 2015; Irwin, 2004) to inform the process of teaching, and as a methodology to approach the data during the research process. I studied mask with Gaulier, Lecoq and Anna Cottis[1], and performed in several masked shows. In my role as an English teacher at the ENPC, I have designed a number of enactive, transdisciplinary modules. My current PhD research examines the micro-phenomenological structure of mask performance, and looks at impacts of mask work on different field groups of students.

3.1 The field of study

The field of study is a group of 11 engineering students, enrolled in an English module aimed at improving both language skills and soft skills, through masked drama. They took part in a weekly 90 minute workshop over 13 weeks, between September 2024 and January 2025. They were a mixed group of first-, second- and third-year students of the engineering

[1] Anna Cottis directs the theatre Company Les Ouvriers de Joie ; https://ouvriersdejoie.org/. Thanks also to Les Créateurs des Masques http://www.lescreateursdemasques.fr/wp/ for their invaluable support.

program, in their 3rd, 4th or 5th year of higher education. The majority spoke French as their first language. Their levels ranged from B1-C1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). To graduate, the institution which accredits engineering programmes in France, the *Commission des Titres d'Ingénieur*, requires a minimum level of B2, an independent user, in order to be able to use English in a professional, international environment. As well as training engineers to a high level of scientific, technical and general competency, *L'Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées (ENPC),* is focused on developing programs and research on sustainability and the energy transition[2].

3.2 Module design

I designed this enactive module in collaboration with Anna Cottis, a mask expert, and Joëlle Aden, a language education researcher. Here, I will briefly outline how the 13-week course unfolds. For more detailed description of the phases and specific exercises, please refer to (Aden & Preller, 2020).

1st Phase – Exploring, connecting to body and environment

The first phase (weeks 1 to 4), involves rediscovering the body and movement in space. This phase corresponds to the phase of exploration and grounding from the enactive pedagogical framework, "Arbre du Savoir-Apprendre/Art of Learning and the Knowledge Tree," (Trocmé-Fabre, 2022). Every session begins with a Feldenkrais exercise (1972), to develop somatic awareness. The students learn the 7 levels of tension, described by Kemp, (2013, p.113), after Lecoq, then play a game to develop complicity (Gaulier, 2024). They learn how to balance the space and develop awareness of moving together in the acting space. During the first session, they discover the neutral masks, with the exercise of "The Fundamental Journey" (Lecoq, 1997, p. 42). They embody the elements. These exercises are silent. They then choose a specific moment during the workshop that struck them and describe this moment phenomenologically, in relation to their senses. To end, they form a circle and discuss, reflecting together on what they did. During the second session, they discover full face expressive masks, and explore how they can move with a character mask, the importance of the fixed point and gestures. Expressive masks play for and with an audience, so they discover the triangular relationship. During the third session, the students try on expressive half-masks and begin to create character through physically changing their body, rhythm and voice. They begin to act and react to each other, in pairs, with a very short dialogue. In the fourth week,

[2] https://ecoledesponts.fr/en/welcome-school

they can use full-face and half-masks to improvise, and discover the use of a non-speaking (full-face expressive mask) witness.

2nd Phase – Developing, innovating

Weeks 5 to 9 are spent improvising and devising, inventing characters and stories. Small groups of students try out their ideas for scenes based on a chosen theme. Taking expressive full or half-masks as the basis for character, they explore ways of walking, moving, rhythms, and interactions in relation to the theme. After trying out ideas in the studio, they write down the scenes. They develop the stories further, testing different possibilities.

3rd Phase – Communicating

Weeks 10 to 13 are spent on dress rehearsals, finishing the show and performing in front of an audience of other classes of language students. During the final session they watch a video recording of the play and compare what they saw to their experience of acting in the play. They reflect on what has changed for them since the beginning of the course.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

Students' verbatim from the discussions at the end of the workshops were recorded and transcribed. Students' phenomenological writing, which took place four times, was collected and analysed to find key concepts, or codes (Paillé & Muchielli, 2016, Miles & Huberman, 1994), which are situated within this specific context. For this exercise, they were invited to revisit their experience of the workshop and to focus on a moment that emerged as having particularly struck them. Then they responded to a series of prompts, which enabled them to relive this moment, reconnecting to the body to then express their phenomenological experience in words, in a second language. Writing about this moment brought further insights into their experience.

Films of each workshop were useful to provide a faithful description of specific exercises, and the teacher's logbooks provided additional descriptions. I used an intuitive approach to the data, noting down observations, questions and insights during the weeks of the course, then listening and transcribing the verbatim, reading the writing and watching the films, allowing patterns to emerge. These were grouped as descriptive codes to catalogue key concepts while preserving their context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I allocated a number between 1-11 randomly, to each of the 11 students, to render the data anonymous. Below, examples of the students' verbatim from recordings are in italics with quotation marks, whereas written extracts from their phenomenological writing are in italics without quotation marks.

4 Results

The three features of mask-work I have highlighted above: disruption and learning, distance-taking from the self and a double focus of attention, are present to some extent in every exercise. I have selected exercises where there is a dominant feature that emerges in the verbatim to present the impact of that feature. I have chosen to present exercises from the exploratory phase, although these three features recurred in the verbatim at different stages throughout the module.

4.1 Neutral mask: disruption and learning

Preparation for disruption and learning

As a body-focused approach breaks with students' preconceived ideas of language classes, based on their experience, I needed to introduce the course in a way that enabled the students to engage with the process. I explained that some of the exercises might not be what they were expecting, inviting them to be curious and to observe how they might respond to that. A somatic exercise at the beginning enabled the students to go inwards and focus on different parts of their body, releasing unnecessary tension, in order to come into presence together in the space. Using specific exercises from the first phase of the enactive process, I will show how the characteristics of disruption and learning, a double focus of attention, and distance-taking from the self emerge from the data, and to what effect.

The neutral mask shifts the focus of the exercise onto the body and its movements. For Lecoq, (2002), a neutral mask "unmasks" (Lecoq, 2002, p.39), enabling the students to connect to "a universal poetic awareness" (Lecoq, 2002, p 47), translated by Murphy (2019) as "a common poetic awareness" to highlight what unites them.

4.1.1 Exercise: embodying natural elements

Through mimesis and imagination, the students explored the four elements. The aim of the exercise was not *to be* the element, nor to illustrate it, but to play at being the element. For Gaulier, "Air, fire, water earth! There is a difference. You enjoy imitating" (Gaulier, 2024, p. 167). I guided the improvisation using my voice and elements of percussion to create the soundscape of the element. The exercise started with the students wearing neutral masks lying on the floor with their eyes closed, listening to the rain stick, for example, for water. They began to feel the way the element caused their body to move. The sound was soft and gentle at the beginning, and the movements were small. Gradually, as the connection to the element deepened, the sound built – movements were of turbulent seas, huge waves, until a climax of

movement and sound was reached, and then the movement of the water slowed again, until it became an imperceptible trickle. During the exercise the students played at accessing the rhythms and shapes of the element, allowing it to move through the body and be expressed. This work is always rooted in observation, mimesis (Lecoq, 1997, 2002), experience and imagination. This had the effect of deeply connecting the student to the rhythms of the natural world, in an imaginative and playful way. As Gallese and Lakoff say: "imagination, like perceiving and doing, is embodied, that is, structured by our constant encounter and interaction with our bodies and brains" (2005, p.455).

4.1.2 Results: impact of the exercise

At the end of the workshop, the students shared their impressions. They reported a clear break with their previous experience:

ST11: "*It was quite new! I'd never done anything like that before, it was mesmerizing – knowing where we were – but not really sure"*

- **Strangeness**, **not knowing, uncomfortable**

The students talked about feeling like strangers to each other and not knowing what to do:

ST7: "*I found it very difficult to act because personally I don't know anybody and it was difficult to do that without knowing anyone else"*

ST5: "*I think it was harder at the beginning, it was a bit uncomfortable because we didn't really know how to act*"

- **Less self-consciousness, more ease**

For others, the fact of having the mask helped, as they felt less self-conscious. For Beghetto, (2014), acting in creative ways can bring up fears of feeling embarrassed:

ST3: "*I like the fact that we had masks, because I felt more comfortable with the mask than without, and I like the experience, now I feel really calm… the fact that we don't know each other much but with mask we don't see each other so it's I think easier to really play the game"*

ST9: *"I didn't think I was capable of doing that in front of strangers, but I think that without the mask it would have been a lot harder"*

Below, a student observed that the difficulty of wearing a mask enabled him to feel something different, and that he was surprised by this:

ST10: *"Masks helped us to not try to act with our face and act with our body and that was really interesting because it's quite difficult to express discovering something without our face and our mouth and so I felt something that I wouldn't have been able to"*

The mask initially disorientated the students, but then they progressively focused on the exercise and enjoyed the experience of playing the elements, using their body. Connecting to, rediscovering the elements in this way develops ways of moving (for Lecoq) which connect the inner and outer worlds, which follow the laws of movement, echoing Hélène Trocmé-Fabre's "laws of life and nature". Later, these rhythms and forces can be used to create characters, or to express the dynamics of drama, ultimately becoming a shared language.

- **Double focus of attention**

The first phenomenon the students mentioned after the neutral mask exercise is the state of focus it generated, specifically, a double focus of attention. They were surprised and struck by the singularity of this state, which was clearly different from ordinary states they were used to. In fact, this state occurs repeatedly in mask-work, but, as it was noticeable here straight away, it was mentioned frequently in the first workshop in relation to the neutral mask exercise:

ST6: "*I would say that I felt hypnotised by that…I thought I couldn't enter this room and be inside the landscape you were describing…I knew I was in the room but…"*

This phenomenon evokes Johnstone's trance state (1999), as well as sharing some characteristics of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), although it is beyond the scope of this article to precisely define the type of Altered State of Consciousness experienced here (this subject is currently being analysed as part of my PhD thesis).

Here, the student was able to let go of his habitual ways of perceiving and moving, by allowing himself to imagine and respond to what he was hearing:

ST10: *"We were hypnotized out of straight logical thinking…we've done things that are not logical because when you have the mask…it made me feel good"*

They were very focused both on the element that they were imagining and what they were hearing, as well as on their bodies moving in the space:

ST4: *"The masks help me to be more focused even though I was still conscious of the people around I was still in the room"*

ST1: *I think the thing I really liked about starting with the masks on the ground, with your eyes closed, is that you are not focused on anything, just yourself and on the things you are hearing*

and imagining. So the mask helps a lot with the water and I don't think I realised that having the masks helps us a lot to concentrate on the body movements and not just our expressions"

The deep focus students reported during the exercise could positively impact learning, both at that moment, when they were visually conjuring up landscapes and images in their mind's eye, from English words, and more broadly, as a receptive state they know they can reach if they want to. This double focus of attention, connecting both their moving bodies in space, and their surroundings and imagination, led to an empathic state towards themselves and each other.

- **Poetic awareness**

In the first workshop, after this exercise**,** all the students chose to do their phenomenological writing about a moment when they were wearing a neutral mask:

ST6: *I really enjoyed when we had to express the feeling of fire. I felt like a drying flower under the sun*

ST11: *I hear the gentle ripple of water. Lying down with the stream of water flowing on the floor. Feeling the gentle flow over me. Breathing, empty mind, body awake to the stream*

Here, a silent enactment of an encounter with an element, conjured up in the imagination, was both an individual experience and, for those watching, contained rhythmic unity, or kinetic resonance, expressed a shared poetic awareness, and led to writing which was both specific, grounded in a sensorimotor experience, and where there were similarities across the group in what was being described. Knowledge, in the form of a deep connection to the element being described, is linked to affect, perception, action and awareness, and was being integrated through language (Gallese & Lakoff, 2005; Kemp, 2013). This phenomenological experience, first lived through the body, and then relived and re expressed through written English has the potential to deepen and transform students' perception of the environment, as something living that they are part of and can experience within them, which could impact the meaning they assign to their role as an engineer (Pearce, 2024).

4.2 Expressive masks: distance-taking from the self

If neutral masks highlight the body and its movements, expressive masks bring characters to life onstage. Those we use initially cover the face completely, so the student cannot speak and they have a simple, identifiable expression which reveals an emotion. Students choose one, and find a body and a way of walking and a gesture that fits with this mask (as well as a level

of tension). This is to focus on the embodied, kinetic aspects of emotion. For Lecoq, emotions have a movement and a rhythm (Lecoq, 1997, 2002).

4.2.1 Exercise: Who's the boss?

The students explore walking in the space with the mask, stopping to make their gesture. Half the group sits down to watch, and the remaining students go to the corner, with their backs turned to the audience. The first expressive mask turns round and comes forward. He looks at the audience. Suddenly a relationship between the actor wearing the mask and the audience is brought to life. It is dynamic and changing, Complicity is born between the actor and the audience. (Gaulier, 2024; McBurney, 2010). The teacher greets the character, asking whether he is the boss. The character responds with a nod, or shake of the head, or shrugs. The character stands on one side of the space and another character turns round and comes forward, stopping centre stage. She looks at the audience, and then at the other character. The teacher asks the students "Who's the boss?" Drawing the audience's attention to this renders the hierarchical relationships between characters very visible. The audience says who they see as the boss, and the characters respond, in character. The second character moves to stand next to the first, and a third character enters. In our study, when a character entered whose body language, rhythm and mask expression strongly indicated she was the 'boss', everyone laughed. It was the laughter of shared recognition. The teacher asked her to look at the others on stage and then look at the audience. She made her 'boss' gesture – pointing with an outstretched arm – and everyone laughed. The improvisation continued, and after, the teacher asked the students what they saw. The students immediately talked about how the characters came to life when they looked at the audience. The contrast between how the students related to each other without masks, and how they reacted to each other when wearing the masks was very noticeable.

4.2.2 Results: impact of the exercise

- **Distance-taking**

Donning different characters was immediately made explicit in the verbatim at the end of the workshop – the students were surprised that the characters were different to the students playing them:

ST10: *I don't see my fellow classmates, but completely new people. They each carry one emotion that reaches from their attitude all the way to their face. I see a scene where there is a boss, shy people and a disturbing one. I fully grasp what they are up to. Nobody is wearing a mask.*

The student also became aware that, as a member of the audience, he was able to see what works dramatically and to make meaning.

Here, a student expressed a very clear distance between himself and his character, in the phenomenological moment he wrote about after the exercise:

ST5: *I embodied a scared and shy character that was under the control of the so-called 'boss'. The boss is looking mad at me and I act frozen, powerless and uncomfortable. My arms are stressed and attached together to protect my character, very close to my body. Due to the serious angry look of the boss, feeling like I am living in a cage behind my mask and my one and only emotion, I smile.*

Another student expressed the same enjoyment at playing her role with emotion, reminding us of Gaulier's emphasis on the actor's pleasure at playing emotions. Likewise, Erhard Stiefel, mask maker for Théâtre du Soleil, relates: "There should be complicity between the actor and her mask as soon as the mask comes to life" (Stiefel, 1975, p51) (author's translation). We can see such complicity in the words below:

ST3: *I was in the middle of the room with an angry mask on. I was the big boss and I was terrifying the people and one was challenging my authority. It was fun and I was really into my character. I was laughing behind my mask*

This distance and non-identification with the character (Gaulier, 2024; Lecoq, 1997; 2002) enables the student to go much further into the role, precisely because there is no confusion between herself and her role. "Freed from her own subjectivity" (Brook, 1988, p. 219), she can explore different paths and create a new character, knowing it is different to her self.

- **Agency**

There was some variation in the way the students perceived their own agency during the exercise; for some, the mask dictated their movements and reactions, for others, they had freedom to choose:

"The mask fixes the attitude that you have to act."[3]

Another student compared the freedom he experienced wearing the neutral mask in strong contrast to a character mask, which had fewer affordances to choose from:

"With a stronger emotion you have less freedom …It's clearer what you feel you should do."[4]

[3] The quality of the recording makes it impossible to identify which student is speaking.

[4] Idem

Another student observed a particular moment that had struck him, while acting with another character on stage during the exercise. Talking about his character in the third person also revealed the inherent distance-taking of self, paradoxically enabling him to fully play the character.

ST8: *We naturally acted together, without hesitation. We were so controlled by our character that we forgot who we were for a few minutes. The masks really helped to enter that status.*

A student felt that he had more agency over how to play:

ST5: *"Although the emotions were forcing us to act in some way, we still had the ability to choose the way we interpreted the emotion of the mask because our body language made the emotions very clear"*

- **Emotion and movement**

As the mask defined the emotion to play, at least to start with, this led to clarity and more precision of gesture, emotion and movement:

"I thought it was more precise because having the masks made it easier to play the emotions in the body because we have to focus on the body and because the mask was doing the initial emotion by itself"[5]

For Freixe , a mask suggests a physical attitude, a body, (Freixe, 2018). For Mnouchkine, when an actor is open to "receiving the mask", it shapes the way every part of her body moves, expressing her inner world (Mnouchkine, 2005, p.138, in Freixe, 2018, p. 10).

When the students' focus is brought on to their body, when playing with a mask or watching other students play, they become strongly aware of how emotions and character are expressed through the body.

4.3 Teaching language: beginning in silence

The enactive pedagogical framework begins with grounding the students in the body and connecting them to their environments, other players and the audience through Trocmé-Fabre's "laws of life and nature," while exploring Lecoq's laws of motion and shared poetic awareness. The first exercises take place in silence as, for Lecoq, "the spoken word often forgets the roots from which it grew" (Lecoq, 2002, p. 29); this echoes Varela's bringing forth a shared world through language, and Aden's translanguaging. Here, the languages at work

[5] Idem

are those of mask and movement. Gradually, more complexity is added using half-masks that can speak.

However, before the students spoke on stage, they had other moments to explore their experience through language, either in phenomenological writing exercises, or by articulating what they saw and experienced to the group. Perhaps because of the strangeness reported at the end of the first session, due to the singular and unusual nature of the exercises, as well as the fact that they did not know each other very well, the students had difficulty finding words to express what they had experienced. Their sentences were full of hesitations as they tried to find words. As they became more comfortable with what they were exploring and integrated new knowledge into what they knew, their discussions became more fluid, as a common language was brought forth.

5 Conclusion

I have described how a transdisciplinary module in masked drama paves the way for a creative approach to translanguaging as part of language-learning, thanks to three characteristics specific to theatrical mask practice. Disruption in sensorimotor processing, leading to heightened body awareness, as well as a loss of identity (face), alter habitual patterns of speaking, relating, acting, being and doing, and enable creative adaptations. When the students accept the strangeness of the sensorimotor disruption caused by the mask, they find paradoxically that they are freer to act creatively, as they are pulled into bodily presence. Their fears of failure are fewer, because, playing different roles, they feel less judged. Overcoming the obstacle of playing with a mask leads to a confidence in their ability to adapt creatively to an uncertain situation. Their enactive-performative learning journey begins with a focus on the moving body, silently reconnecting to the natural world and their imagination, to then explore different roles through full-face character masks and, finally, speaking half-masks. Words emerge progressively from the need to speak. This enables students to experience and observe what is present in communication but not always voiced – emotions and intercorporeality. Finding the words to describe these wordless experiences builds a shared language. Distance-taking from the self and a double focus of attention lead to perspective-changing and empathy, a deep focus of attention and an awareness of play, and playing a role. Students discover empirically how a complicit audience participates in creating meaning, enacting what Varela describes as “an empathic mesh” (1996, p. 340).

In this way, these three features of mask-work foster a bottom-up and top-down epistemological awareness of the invisible elements of communication, especially in relation to the central role of the body and emotions, paving the way for devising a play together.

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