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## EVERYONE'S A CRITIC: INTRODUCING FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE WITH POPULAR CULTURE

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### Abstract

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Motivating students placed in remedial reading courses after several semesters of college coursework is a considerable instructional challenge. When students learn to use reading strategies and skills with engaging, “entertaining” texts, through guided practice, they can eventually apply those skills to more academic texts that they encounter in their coursework and on standardized exams. Tapping into students’ interests with materials that relate to popular culture is a way to meaningfully connect with students in addition to helping them gain awareness of reading skills they already use in everyday life, such as thinking critically and unraveling figurative language. This approach involves reading instructors’ selecting materials from the internet, including movie reviews and popular song lyrics that many students find familiar. Experience with Regents’ reading course students has shown that students become more engaged in discussion and more likely to remember texts and strategies when the readings relate to topics that interest them, including popular films and music.

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### Introduction

“The passages are so boring; I can’t stay awake during the test.” This is the most typical response I hear for a question I ask each first day of each term I teach the Regents’ reading course: What do you find challenging about the reading exam? As an instructor but not a test designer, I cannot alter the exam passages that my students encounter. I can, however, control the context of our daily in-class activities and go beyond the course text to provide meaningful and hopefully more stimulating reading experiences. At the same time, I hope to motivate my students to enjoy reading so that they can better tackle complex reading tasks including text analysis and inferential comprehension.

Two key factors I consider when designing reading lessons are maximizing student interaction and the use of thought-provoking materials. According to Mikulecky (1990), interaction, in the form of pair and group work, encourages students to “become aware of their own reading/thinking processes” (p. 29). Mikulecky further suggests providing students with materials that motivate them, such as newspaper or magazine articles.

Mikulecky’s advice is valuable because, as a Regents’ Reading instructor, my first concern is engaging students in the readings in an attempt to stimulate their thinking. My aim is to illustrate that reading is an active rather than passive process that requires interaction between the students and the texts. I typically follow Mikulecky’s recommended lesson structure, which begins with simple explanations of the target skill and the purpose for the given exercises, followed by a teacher led example(s). After I model examples with “think alouds” and begin to elicit student responses, students are ready to work in pairs and, throughout the course, the tasks become gradually more challenging. As different skills are introduced in subsequent class

sessions, I review past skills and help students integrate their new skills into an evolving repertoire.

### **Background on the Course and Students' Interests**

Georgia universities place students in Regents' courses because they have either failed a standardized test (the Regents' exam) or they did not register to take the test before earning a certain number of credit hours. Students, generally juniors or seniors, are required to take the course and, although they do not receive credit, they must pay for the class. Therefore, the students enter the class with negative feelings about the course and often about reading in general. These negative feelings are compounded for the large number of students who take a Regents' course two, three, or sometimes even six times before passing the exam.

As an initial assessment of students' reading motivation and interests, I give them a questionnaire on the first day of class in which I inquire about their reading habits, goals, and the types of material they enjoy reading. Grabe and Stoller (2002) support using this type of student interest survey as an important tool to "cultivate better attitudes toward reading" (p. 89). The first step is identifying students' feelings about reading; the second is creating lessons based on materials they enjoy and may therefore be inspired to read. For the past three semesters, the results of the questionnaire have been relatively similar: only a few students mention positive feelings towards reading and being self-motivated to read, and most mention that the Regents' passages (both in the text book, if they have previously taken the course, and on the actual exam) are "boring" and, on a related note, "difficult to understand." Those who mention finding reading enjoyable, explain that they prefer "entertaining" texts.

During the past three terms, I have also monitored my students' interest levels by keeping notes about participation (following each class session) for the various activities. The group of Regents' students is typically quite diverse, including native and nonnative English speakers from numerous linguistic and cultural backgrounds. With such a diverse group, appealing to all of their needs and interests is a challenge; however these students are generally unified in their enthusiasm for materials based on popular culture. In fact, students' participation is most lively when reading content is based on events or topics they can relate to, particularly current events, the arts, and music. In addition, many of the students already have background knowledge and opinions about these current events or artists, which can serve as fuel for an energetic discussion or debate. This is significant because, for Regents' instructors, increasing students' motivation is crucial for facilitating their improvement.

In addition to monitoring students' motivation, throughout each term, I have kept a record of the most challenging aspects of the Regents' passages. In observing students' difficulties with practice tests and reading activities, figurative language clearly generates the largest number of questions. We spend a good deal of time unraveling the meaning of authors' symbolic language; yet, in our course text, there are few activities that focus specifically on figurative language. Through internet and library searches, I have found supplemental sources, but these are either geared toward much younger learners or involve simpler examples than those my students face on the exam. Outside of class, students (both native and nonnative speakers) who visit my office for additional help request explanations of symbolic language more than any other class topic. For native English speakers, the issue may be a lack of extensive exposure to sophisticated reading materials that contain figurative language. For nonnative speakers, the issue is likely the absence of exposure in both spoken and written discourse.

## **Figurative Language**

Figurative language, as defined by Harris and Hodges (1995), is the “expressive, non-literal use of language for special effects, usually through images” (p. 84). Navigating one’s way through figurative language requires a deeper level of text comprehension, an understanding beyond the literal level using analytical and inferential skills. For either native or nonnative English speakers, figurative language often seems complex and challenging.

As an aspect of academic reading, symbolic language is in need of more attention with both specific activities and in-class discussion. Students’ inability to grasp symbolic language can lead to a breakdown in understanding key points or even comprehending the passage as a whole (a barrier to identifying the main idea and supporting points within a text). In addition to being complex to understand, figurative language can also be difficult to teach, particularly if students’ prior exposure occurred in a dry, dull format with materials that they could not relate to, decreasing their incentive.

On the Regents’ exam, interpreting figurative/symbolic language (also referred to as “literary devices”) is considered an “analysis” skill (the three other skills are comprised of vocabulary, inferential comprehension, and literal comprehension). However, students analyze the author’s language, as one of the writer’s tools, to make *inferences* related to the passage. For this reason, inferential and analytical skills are relatively intertwined. For analysis items, students are also required “to make inferences about an author’s purpose and the style or structure of a passage” and “infer the writer’s intentions” (Gordon, 2000, p. 4). Analysis questions relate to the attitude and point of view of the author and identifying facts versus opinions. As with inferential comprehension questions, students are required to draw on critical thinking skills and make judgments about the text. This task is compounded when passages and/or textbook materials are far removed from the students’ interests or everyday reading experiences.

## **Exploring Figurative Language with Popular Culture**

In order to engage students in analyzing figurative language, I provide examples from current movie reviews and popular songs. My introduction to symbolic language takes place after we have worked on tone and briefly touched on other aspects of the analysis section of the course. This figurative language lesson encompasses two full class periods. However, the concepts are continuously reviewed throughout the semester, particularly as we find examples of figurative language when analyzing practice tests.

I begin my explanation with common examples of figurative language, such as “She’s as big as a house,” “Life is a game,” and “He’s calling the shots.” I also discuss how we incorporate such expressions into our everyday conversations, usually quite naturally, without analyzing the origin of the phrases. I explain that these creative expressions are examples of figurative language: expressions which provide descriptive information about a subject in a non-literal way. I then ask the students to supply additional examples and write those examples on the board. At this stage, the goal is for students to realize that figurative language exists in their own discourse, that this language is more familiar than they may have previously realized.

## **Popular Music**

For this section of the lesson, I provide students with several examples and explanations of the types of figurative language including, idioms, similes, and metaphors. I explain that these all occur in popular music, which they probably hear every day. Although other types of figurative language exist (alliteration, assonance, etc.) these may be touched on but not explored

in depth because of the limited amount of time and because they are less prevalent on the Regents' exam. The explanation and examples are supported by textbook activities from a variety of sources, mainly because the course text is insufficient in this area.

I place students in pairs by asking them to match an example of figurative language with a definition for that example. Each student receives a card and his or her partner has either the definition or the figurative phrase that matches that definition. The students circulate around the room for about four or five minutes, searching for their partner. Examples of the figurative phrases are: "as busy as a bee" and "like gangbusters." The definitions include "buzzing with activity" and "with energetic speed." These examples are in Brenda Smith's (2003) "Bridging the Gap" text (p. 550). As students locate their partners, I write the list of phrases on the board. After everyone has located their partner, I read the phrases and ask the pairs to orally share the matching definitions with the phrases.

Next, while in pairs, students write four examples of figurative language. These can be examples we have seen on practice tests or examples that they hear and use regularly (slang usage is also acceptable). I add that the students do not have to fully understand the meaning of an example to include it on the list. They may even use the course text to find examples they have highlighted on practice tests.

I have used this activity with students each term and found that they do not experience difficulty thinking of at least four examples. The importance of this task is that there is an opportunity to emphasize that students "own this language." After about three minutes, I circulate amongst the pairs and read a few of their examples out loud while asking for volunteers to briefly explain the phrases' meanings.

At this point, are ready to read and listen to figurative phrases in a well-known song. In pairs, students explore the symbolic language in the currently popular tune "[White Flag](#)" by the artist Dido. Although this song may not appeal to all of the students' tastes, most or possibly all of them have heard it and are familiar with the style and tone of the song. I play the first few minutes to give the students time to follow along with the lyrics and hear auditory cues to the nature of the figurative language, meaning that the singer's desperation is conveyed in both the style of her singing and the language she uses. The students then tell me about the tone of the song using as many different adjectives as possible. Then, in pairs, students circle the instances of figurative language. In their own words, they "translate" the meaning of those examples in the margin and prepare to orally explain the figurative meaning.

I allow about ten to fifteen minutes (depending on their ease with "translating") for this activity. After they complete their "translations," I randomly ask each pair to give one example from the song and provide their explanation of the meaning. These are then written on the board as we compare varying "translations" from pair to pair. An example is the line "I will go down with this ship," which students may translate as "I will stay devoted to you" or "I won't give up on our love." We accompany the examples with a discussion about the difference between and literal words and the figurative meaning the words represent. Moreover, we decide how the figurative elements contribute to the overall meaning. For example, Dido is like a dedicated captain, choosing to sink with the ship that represents her relentless love. I ask the students why Dido may have chosen these phrases in particular. This discussion acts as a transition into our next activity for which students act as critics, analyzing and using the language to communicate their opinions.

### Movie Reviews

Movie reviews, particularly negative ones, provide rich and often humorous examples of figurative language. The reviewers are exceptionally critical and paint a descriptive picture of a film as entertaining, poorly crafted, boring, or even ridiculous. As reviewers use multiple types of figurative language in addition to adjectives that provide further clues to the overall point of view of the reviewer, movie reviews serve as a fun, worthwhile activity for exploring idioms, similes, metaphors, and other types of descriptive language. Further, students may have background knowledge about the films, some of which they might have already seen or be interested in seeing. This knowledge allows learners to think critically about whether or not they agree with the writer and argue for or against the author's opinion. This is the sort of interactive reading and engagement with texts that assists students in practicing various higher level reading skills.

The current reviews, which I located via the [Yahoo Movies](#) website, are for three films: "[The Bourne Identity](#)," "[A Cinderella Story](#)," and "[The Notebook](#)." It is important to note that different types of films appeal to different students; thus, selecting examples from various genres is most beneficial. Students' disinterest in seeing a given film actually may serve as an aid for discussion because students themselves can play the role of the critic in being called on to explain why one film may be "better" than another.

The first review we analyze is for the film "[A Cinderella Story](#)." I selected this review because there is quite a bit of figurative language and the tone of the review is humorous. The humor is illustrated with figurative language as well as the author's use of sarcasm. It is worth noting that sarcasm is often the most difficult type of tone for students to recognize and so examples containing sarcasm are valuable. As with the Dido song, students work together to identify and explain the figurative phrases. For this activity, students work in groups of three. I choose the groups myself by giving each student a card with a number and asking them to locate the other students who received the same number. I do not reveal the tone of the passage. Instead, I elicit the figurative phrase examples, such as "queen bee," "the lines often blurred," and "a load of crap" and ask the students to determine the mood as we *translate* these phrases and examine the author's statements. I allot as much time as needed to work on analyzing the review and then move to the analysis of a Regents' passage.

The Regents' passages are generally about two paragraphs in length and, at most, take about ten to fifteen minutes to read and discuss. I locate Regents' passages that have similar types of figurative phrases (idioms, metaphors, and similes) and we alternate between movie review activities and practice exam passages. The goal of this arrangement is to maintain students' interest while highlighting the connection between Regents' passages and other, more current materials based on popular culture.

My inspiration for using more than one movie review is a result of the success I had last semester with the review for "[The Notebook](#)." When I noticed students' attention span waning during our figurative language discussions, I realized that even I had to admit that the Regents' examples were sometimes dull and inspired little debate. For instance, passages that contain figurative elements are often taken from classical literature, which, according to students' remarks, bear little relationship to their lives. At that time, I decided to investigate other sources that would stimulate more student lead analyses. Although "The Notebook" (a romance) is not everyone's favorite type of film, students were actively engaged in finding the figurative phrases and enjoyed explaining them. Further, students completed the activity with ease and participated eagerly in the follow up discussion on tone.

A related and important point about the value of these film reviews is the opportunity to interweave a review of vocabulary. As mentioned earlier, reviewing previously taught skills is a vital part of assisting students in reading skill development and reviews, such as “[The Bourne Identity](#),” are often rich in vocabulary. Like figurative elements, adjectives contribute to the overall tone of the passage. Examples are the terms “covert,” “imperial,” “contemporary,” and “misogynistic” which appear in this film critique as well as in Regents’ passages. Lower frequency adjectives can pose a challenge for students and this lesson provides another opportunity to analyze them.

As a final activity, for homework, students write a brief review of their own based either on one of the films we have discussed in class or any other film/television program they have recently seen. For this activity, the students must use at least five examples of any type of figurative language. At this point in the course, the students have read and analyzed multiple examples of figurative language both within Regents’ exam passages and within samples from popular culture. The prior exposure affords students plenty of examples to reflect on when composing their reviews.

Although this is a reading course, a brief writing assignment is constructive in that it prompts students to actively use figurative language while thinking critically about a given story. The review writing assignment can be given on the last class day before the weekend so that students can share their reviews in groups of four the following week. Students choose the most interesting or best quality review from their group, which a selected group member reads aloud for the entire class to enjoy.

In the event that some students critique the same film or program, I encourage them to debate the quality of that film/program. In prior semesters, I found that debate about passages or scenarios is extremely useful because students are required to support their arguments with examples from the text or scenario rather than their own imagination. The debate also serves as a means to motivate students to participate so that they continue the interaction when we analyze and make inferences with our practice exam passages. Continuously alternating between current, “more interesting” examples and the Regents’ practice passages can promote the transfer of skills gained in the “fun” activity to the drier, more “boring” passages.

## **Conclusion**

The overall goal of these activities is for students to gain control over symbolic language encountered in academic or sophisticated writing. As a result of these activities, students should become more confident during the Regents’ exam as well as when reading in general. Although I have chosen to focus on films and popular music, there are numerous other sources for exploring figurative language. According to Schmitt (2000), additional genres that use idioms heavily include horoscopes, journalism, and informal conversations. Any of these sources are readily available on the internet for instructors to create lessons for their particular classes’ reading goals. Students, especially adults, should find these activities helpful in increasing their comprehension, which motivates them and aids them in becoming more confident readers.

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