

## Developing Confidence in Abstract Thinking

A major challenge for Developmental students is feeling comfortable with abstract thinking—analogies, metaphors, similes, any kind of thinking that is removed from concrete examples and facts. Interpreting poetry is the prototype of this kind of thinking but it is an important component in all kinds of texts. Most of our students lack experience and confidence interpreting abstract ideas; in fact, they are secretly convinced that although they may be drawn to poetry, for example, it is far too abstract for them to understand. Part of building their confidence as critical readers and thinkers is to provide them tools for interpreting abstractions. To do this, I use poetry directly or focus on examples of figurative language or a key abstract concept in a core text.

Students need a protocol—a series of steps they can go through to arrive at comprehension. Whether or not they use these steps verbatim as they interpret a metaphor or abstract concept, practicing the protocol will help them to understand the thinking process and be patient with themselves as they gain confidence in their thinking ability. Understanding their thinking process will also help them become more flexible and strategic readers. For example, one important reading strategy is to continue reading when you realize you haven't understood a concept. The example or description that follows the concept helps to illuminate it. Being able to grasp and utilize the relationship between abstract and concrete is one characteristic of a mature reader.

### Teaching Poetry

In the first chapter of Assata's autobiography, Assata is being subjected to one violent abuse after another as she lies, in a hospital bed, seriously injured, with hostile New Jersey state police stationed at her door. A friendly nurse gives her a volume of poetry that includes Claude McKay's poem, "If We Must Die". It was written in 1919 as a tribute to courageous blacks fighting back against widespread racist assaults in southern cities after WWI.

Assata reads the poem loudly, so her abusers can hear, using it as both a protective shield and a weapon against her "captors". In spite of her helpless circumstances, Assata's strength of spirit prevents her from submitting to injustice. Students resonate strongly to Assata's description of her experience with the New Jersey police, both on the highway when she is apprehended and in the hospital; therefore, when I distribute the poem to them, they are highly motivated to understand it. I use that as an opportunity to teach them a process for interpreting poetry.

#### "If We Must Die"

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursed lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one death blow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

I ask them to first read through the poem silently looking for any vocabulary they don't know, writing the definitions of the new vocabulary on the board. Next, I ask them to read the poem silently again in sentences, reading the punctuation as well as the words. Then I read it aloud, in sentences, so they can hear the syntax and complete thoughts. We briefly discuss the historical context of the poem.

I ask them to visualize the first image (lines 1 – 4) as though it were a scene in a movie. "What do you see?" "Why 'penned'?" "Why are the dogs mocking them?" "Given the historical context, who are the hogs? Who are the dogs?" It is important that I not tell them the meaning and that my questions elicit responses that help the class unlock the meaning of the image. Once they grasp this image, the rest of the poem comes easily. Together, we explicate every word and line, and then I ask for volunteers to read the poem aloud, dramatically. This can be a very moving experience, as it helps them express their empathy with Assata's fighting spirit.

As long as this process takes, it is time worth spent. Students are not just deepening their affinity for the author of the core text, they are learning about the relationship between the concrete and the abstract—what imagery is all about. They are learning that abstract thinking requires analysis, and, most importantly, that it is within their grasp.

### Teaching Figurative Language

Young people love songs, and romantic love is a theme for which they never tire. To introduce them to figurative language, I distribute the lyrics to the song, "Some Say Love, It is a River" and play it in class.

#### "Some Say Love, It is a River"

*Some say love, it is a river that drowns the tender reed  
Some say love, it is a razor that leaves your soul to bleed*

*Some say love, it is a hunger an endless aching need  
I say love, it is a flower and you, it's only seed*

*It's the heart, afraid of breaking that never learns to  
dance*

*It's the dream, afraid of waking that never takes the  
chance*

*It's the one who won't be taken who cannot seem to give  
And the soul, afraid of dying that never learns to live*

*When the night has been too lonely and the road has been  
too long*

*And you think that love is only for the lucky and the  
strong*

*Just remember in the winter far beneath the bitter snow  
Lies the seed that with the sun's love, in the spring  
becomes the rose*

I ask them to choose one image to explain. What is it saying about love? I ask them to share their explanation with a classmate and then with the whole class. Then I ask them to work in groups to write the literal meaning of the whole poem. “Love can be so deeply painful that a person can become afraid of opening themselves to its power. But, in fact, love is a vital part of the human experience which we should all allow into our lives.” Something like that... I ask them to compare the literal rendition of the poem to the figurative rendition, the song lyrics. Which is more effective in conveying meaning? Why? Which is more pleasurable? Why? Through this discussion, students discover the usefulness of evoking an emotional response through imagery. Now they are ready to learn about descriptive language, metaphor, simile, and personification—some essential tools for deepening the aesthetic response. *The Farming of Bones*, one of the core texts I have used, is loaded with beautiful examples of figurative language that provide me an opportunity to teach students how to think abstractly. The novel focuses on the fate of undocumented Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic during the massacre of 1937. After teaching the types of figurative language with the help of a reading skills text (I use *Making Reading Relevant*, Pearson Prentice Hall), students are ready to identify and interpret them in an authentic text, *The Farming of Bones*.

The following passage contains a metaphor which is central to the theme of the novel. Amabelle (the main character) and her lover Sebastian are reflecting on the tragedies of their lives. Sebastian says, “Sometimes the people in the fields, when they’re tired and angry, they say we’re an orphaned people,” he said. “They say we are the burnt crud at the bottom of the pot. They say some people don’t belong anywhere and that’s us....” I first ask the students to underline the words that are figurative and then identify whether it is a metaphor, simile, or personification. (This is easy for them and is an example of a step by step approach that helps guide them to mastery.) Then I ask them to articulate what two things are being compared to each other in this metaphor—1. Haitian sugar cane cutters, 2. burnt crud at the bottom of the pot. I ask them to describe #2. It’s black, burnt, stuck to the pot, a waste product to be thrown away. It is in the process of seeing, smelling, and experiencing this image that students become able to explain the meaning of the metaphor. Throughout the reading of the novel, I ask them many times to use this process \* (see the handout in Notes) to interpret figurative language, reminding them not to skip any steps. By the end of the semester, they have become comfortable and skilled with the process.

## Teaching concepts deeply

The prologue of *The Farming of Bones* is a biblical passage from the book of Judges that describes a battle between two tribes. To identify the tribal origin of fleeing refugees, one of the tribes uses the pronunciation of the word *shibboleth* and slaughters anyone whose pronunciation of the word reveals that they are from the enemy tribe. This ancient story reveals the origin of a concept that has many modern applications. Some are benign, for example, how one’s knowledge of text messaging abbreviations (lol or omw) pretty much identifies the generation to which you belong. And some are far from benign; they are used as a tool for ethnic cleansing and genocide. *The Farming of Bones* describes how the word *perejil* (meaning parsley, in Spanish) was used to separate Haitians from Dominicans in the mass slaughter of 1937. A complex concept that is empowering for students to master, *shibboleth* is central to the novel’s theme of anti-immigrant racism.

I do a “Think Aloud” \* (see Notes) of the biblical passage before we actually begin reading the novel. A “Think Aloud” is a Reading Apprenticeship strategy where a reader reads the text aloud interspersed with his or her thoughts about the text. When a mature reader does a “Think Aloud”, it makes the normally invisible process of comprehension visible to developing readers. I ask students to do informal internet research of *shibboleth* for homework and in the next class, we discuss many examples of the concept. As students progress through the novel, they arrive at the climax when the fleeing Haitian immigrants are forced to say the word ‘perejil’ as a *shibboleth*. Once again, this concept is the focus of class discussion. I then assign an essay, an extended definition: *Shibboleth* and its use in the Dominican Republic.

In this composition you will discuss the concept of *Shibboleth* and how it was used in the Dominican Republic in 1937. From a writing/research perspective you will learn how to summarize, paraphrase, and use direct quotations.

- First, define and explain the term *Shibboleth*. You may include a **quotation** from a dictionary but the *explanation of this concept should be completely in your own words. Part of this should be an explanation of the origin of the word, Shibboleth. As part of your definition, please paraphrase the biblical passage that Danticat includes as the preface to The Farming of Bones.*
- Second, summarize chapter 29, the events in Dajabon. Include one direct quotation in your summary. Make sure you establish a smooth transition between this paragraph and the first one that explains *Shibboleth*.
- Lastly, draw a conclusion about what you've written so far. Why does it matter? Why should we care? Develop your point of view fully. You could discuss how the characters in *Farming* have been impacted by the events in the novel and/or your own experiences that led you to think the way you do.

By the end of the semester, students can speak fluently about this sophisticated concept. They have learned the way concepts originate from concrete experience. (Indeed, all ideas are based on the experience of someone.) They have also learned how abstractions are elucidated through examples and description (the basis of *elaboration*—a crucial aspect of all academic discussion and writing). And, last but not least, they have gained confidence in their ability to master abstract ideas.

**Notes**

**I Think Aloud**

**Procedures**

**While reading**, participants in a small group **verbalize their thinking processes** in response to a text. They interrupt their (oral or silent) reading of the text to intersperse mental pictures or questions, to puzzle over words or meanings, to make connections from their own lives, to make predictions about the direction the text will take, to share feelings about the text or author, etc. Participants **take turns thinking aloud** in this way with a section of a text. The Think Aloud **bookmarks** offer some prompts that may provide a scaffold for first-time users of this routine. After everyone in the small group has read and thought aloud through at least one section of the text, the **group discusses** what participants noticed about their own reading or the reading of their partners during the think aloud. WestEd

**II Figurative Language: A Process for Understanding it**

Metaphor

an implied comparison between two unlike things that actually have something important in common

Simile

a stated comparison between two unlike things that actually have something important in common

P. 119

First paragraph “The children, with the dust like a flying rug at their heels....”

•Metaphor or Simile? \_\_\_\_\_

(1)\_\_\_\_\_ is being compared to

(2)\_\_\_\_\_.

•Think about (2). What do you see/hear?

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P. 139

First paragraph “The dust rises in funnels from the ground and sweeps down the road. Like a sheet come undone from the clothesline, it makes its own shadow, along with the birds that circle above....”

•Metaphor or Simile? \_\_\_\_\_

(1)\_\_\_\_\_ is being compared to

(2)\_\_\_\_\_.

• Think about (2). What do you see/hear?

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•How is this like (1)? Or, what is it saying about (1)?

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