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# The Comparison of Novice and Master Instrumental Music Educators' Use of Figurative Language and Their Attitudes Concerning It as a Tool for Effective Teaching

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to compare the use of figurative language between master and novice instrumental music teachers and to investigate their attitudes toward figurative language as a teaching tool. Figurative language is defined as any creative verbal instruction intended to teach a concept. Sixteen ( $N = 16$ ) secondary school, instrumental directors were selected as participants. These were divided into two groups of novice and master teachers. Novice teachers were student teachers or first-year teachers, and master teachers had a minimum of eight years of experience, were selected as master teachers by professors at state universities and colleges, had ensembles that performed at a state convention, and had multiple ensembles with superior ratings at music festivals. Forty-five minutes of instruction were videotaped for each participant and the verbal instruction was transcribed for analysis. The frequency of figurative language usage was counted and the means of the two groups were compared. Master teachers in this study were found to have more instances of figurative language use than novice teachers. Following instruction, three survey questions were asked of participants to determine attitudes towards figurative language and it was found that master teachers valued the teaching tool slightly more than novice teachers.

## Introduction

Teaching instrumental music, at any level, is a difficult profession. An instructor must first understand numerous music concepts and then be effective in conveying those to students.

Compounding the difficulty level, each instrument has its own unique concerns such as playing technique, transpositions, clefs, ranges, embouchures etc. Furthermore, the music teacher must also know about the music itself—its tonality, articulations, dynamics, orchestration, and style—and its place in music history. Reimer (2003) adds to the difficulty of teaching music by positing that music educators

are expected to clarify what music is all about, by helping our students compose, perform, improvise, listen, more adequately and satisfyingly, and to understand what they are doing and why. Furthermore, we work in a field—education—that consists largely of the development of people’s abilities to share meanings about humans and their world. (p. 134).

With these expectations, and many other issues such as increasing time for standardized testing, comes the ever-increasing problem of limited rehearsal time to adequately teach the scope and sequence of the curriculum that also includes a vast repertoire of music from current styles to centuries past. Efficiency in teaching must become a well-developed skill with proficient verbal instruction as one of the essential abilities for teachers to cultivate.

### Related Literature

Verbal instruction is needed to teach all subjects; however, Baxter and Stauffer (1988) noted that less verbal instruction is used by music teachers because of the nonverbal nature of music (p. 54). In comparing beginning versus experienced elementary music educators in the use of teaching time, Wagner and Strul (1979) posit that experienced teachers inadvertently understand the efficiency of minimal verbiage as they spoke approximately half of the time of

pre-service teachers (p. 120). This research supports Buell (1990) and Regelski (1975) who assert that less talking and more playing is best because directors are to engage students directly with sound.

In studying selected rehearsal behaviors of five choral conductors, Thurman (1977) found that they communicated verbally approximately 40% of rehearsal time. Goolsby (1996) compared experienced instrumental teachers with novice and student instrumental teachers and found that the experienced teachers verbalized considerably less and let the ensemble play more—conjecturing that this may be due to more efficient use of language (p. 299). These findings support the notion that conducting is a non-verbal form of communication, (Green & Malko, 1997; Hunsberger & Ernst, 1983; Shrock & Mayhall, 2011).

Although less verbal instruction is an appropriate consideration for music teachers, some verbal communication must be used. A review of existing literature revealed that topics have focused on the amount of verbal language used (Carpenter, 1988; Goolsby, 1996; Skadsem, 1997), the effects of verbal instruction on students' understanding, performance and attentiveness (Price, 1983; Skadsem, 1997; Yarbrough & Price, 1981), sequential patterns of verbal instruction (Goolsby, 1997; Price, 1992; Yarbrough & Price, 1989), and the topics discussed when using verbal language (Buell, 1990; Carpenter, 1988).

O'Brien (1989), surveyed current literature on verbal instruction and determined that language used is either analytical or figurative. While both forms are needed for instruction (Leonhard & House 1959; Reimer, 1970; Regelski, 1981; Tait & Haack, 1984), Jensen (1988) claimed the employment of analogy (figurative language) as superior to analytical since "It can be the perfect vehicle by which your students understand in 10 seconds something which might ordinarily take 60 seconds or even 60 minutes" (p. 109). Stollak and Alexander (1998) concur

with Jensen and claim that a music teacher's ability to use figurative language can facilitate students' understanding of technique, which allows more time devoted to musicality issues, which is the composer's fundamental goal (p.17).

This investigation was guided by four questions: How do instrumental teachers use verbal instruction in class? What types of verbal instruction are employed? Does figurative language have an important place in teaching music? Is there a difference between novice and master teachers' use of figurative language?

### Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' use and attitudes towards verbal instruction. If figurative language is one of the most "useful" communication tools, as Jensen (1988) suggests, then it may be found that a master teacher would employ the technique more readily than a novice teacher, and the recognition of its effectiveness would be more highly regarded. To explore these two inquiries, a mixed method approach was employed—first using a *t*-test to determine whether there was a difference of figurative language use between novice and master instrumental music teachers—followed by a survey to determine if there was a difference in attitude towards figurative language as an effective teaching tool.

Participants for this study were selected from Colorado public middle or high school instrumental teachers. Through email, 15 qualified college/university music professors from four leading institutions in the state determined who were master teachers and who were novice teachers. These professors were given prompts to aid in identifying the teachers. Novice teachers were those who were in their student teaching experience or were first-year teachers. Master

teachers were teachers who had a minimum of eight years of teaching experience, had conducted ensembles with numerous superior ratings at large group festivals, and had ensembles selected to perform at the state's music education conference. Finally, higher education faculty were asked to consider the master teacher as someone who they have used, or would be glad to use, as a cooperating teacher for their own students' student teaching placement.

The emails generated a list of names who were potential participants. Master teachers were ranked by the number of times their name appeared in each professor's list, the top eight ( $n = 8$ ) were selected. Of the eight master teachers two were females and six were males with years of experience ranging from 9 to 28. Two of the master teachers held undergraduate degrees in music education, three teachers had completed masters degrees, and three teachers held doctorate degrees. To create a balanced comparison that considered gender as a variable, eight novice teachers ( $n = 8$ ) were randomly selected from the list with two females and six males; four were first-year teachers and four were student teachers. This process culminated in sixteen participants ( $N = 16$ ) who were middle or high school instrumental music educators teaching in a public-school environment (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Teachers' Demographics*

<u>Novice Teacher</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Years of Experience</u>	<u>School</u>	<u>Last Degree</u>	<u>Ensemble</u>
#1	Female	25	Student Teacher	Middle	None	Band
#2	Female	25	First Year	Middle	BME	Orchestra
#3	Male	21	Student Teacher	Middle	None	Band
#4	Male	24	First Year	High	BME	Orchestra
#5	Male	22	Student Teacher	High	None	Band
#6	Male	25	First Year	Middle	BME	Band
#7	Male	24	Student Teacher	High	None	Orchestra
#8	Male	24	First Year	Middle	BME	Band
<u>Master Teacher</u>						
#1	Male	33	9	High	BME	Band
#2	Male	38	15	High	MA	Band
#3	Male	49	27	High	PhD	Band
#4	Female	46	20	High	BME	Orchestra
#5	Male	38	15	Middle	MME	Band
#6	Female	49	28	Middle	PhD	Orchestra
#7	Male	54	27	High	PhD	Band
#8	Male	42	15	Middle	MA	Orchestra

Data collection was conducted in the spring of 2005 from January through May.

Following the participant identification process, a videotape of the participants' teaching was

made and transcripts created. To accommodate varying lengths of rehearsal time among the schools, a 45-minute limit was imposed for the observational analysis frame. An analysis of the amount of figurative language used during the rehearsal was performed.

When determining examples of figurative language, the researcher considered any means of verbal creativity used to convey a concept (e.g., metaphor, analogy, simile, and metonymy). Conventional metaphors as coined by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) that involve simple, descriptive language used in everyday life were also considered as figurative language.

The following phrases provide examples of figurative language usage included in this study.

“This is like...”

“This reminds me of when...”

“This should feel like...”

“Play fat.”

“Play that part as if...”

“I want you to think about a time when...”

“Think of this like...”

“You sound like...”

The number of uses of figurative language terms were identified and recorded for each group of participants. A *t*-test for independent samples was then computed to determine whether a significant difference existed between master versus novice teachers' figurative language use.

After each lesson observation, an interview was conducted with participants. The first two questions were carefully crafted, open ended questions so as not to lead the participants in

any specific direction. The third question used a Likert-type scale asking participants' opinion regarding figurative language. The questions were:

1. What do you think is the most effective teaching technique?
2. Describe how important language is to your instruction and what types of language you think are effective during rehearsals.
3. What do you think about figurative language? Is it: 1) Not important at all; 2) Not important; 3) Neither; 4) Important; 5) Very Important

### Results

A *t*-test for independent samples was computed to compare the frequency of figurative language use within verbal language among master teachers and novice teachers. A significant difference ( $p = .01$ ) was found in the use of figurative language between master teachers ( $M = 10.88$ ,  $SD = 39.27$ ) and novice teachers ( $M = 2.63$ ,  $SD = 9.13$ );  $t(14) = 3.35$ . See Table 2 for novice and master teachers' specific frequency of figurative language use.

Table 2

*Recorded Uses of Figurative Language*


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<u>Teacher</u>	<u>Number of Uses</u>
<u>Novice Teacher</u>	
#1	2
#2	0
#3	0
#4	9
#5	3
#6	4
#7	0
#8	3
<u>Master Teacher</u>	
#1	9
#2	12
#3	6
#4	14
#5	6
#6	2
#7	20
#8	18

Between the two groups of teachers examined by this research investigation, master teachers used more figurative language than novice teachers. Every novice teacher, except participant #4, used four or less instances of figurative language during the 45-minute rehearsal analysis period and three participants did not include figurative language in their verbal instruction. Of the master teachers all, except participant #6, used six or more instances of figurative language during the 45-minute rehearsal analysis period with the most figurative language used by participant #7.

Following the 45-minute rehearsal observation, three survey questions were asked. Survey Question 1 stated, “What do you think is the most affective teaching technique?” Most novice teachers did not explicitly answer this question with figurative language (e.g., analogy). Novice teacher #6 provided a figurative language answer, “A lot of times I will try to relate it to something else. Like using a descriptive word.” Novice teacher #7 first answered by identifying demonstration, but in explaining the answer he added, “It is helpful to paint a picture for them.” Five of the eight master teachers answered with figurative language; three used the term analogy and two said to relate it to something else.

Table 3

*Participants' Summative Answers On What They Think is Their Most Effective Teaching**Technique*


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Teacher	Answer
Novice Teacher	
#1	Approach it through multiple learning styles
#2	Breaking down problems into small parts
#3	Self discovery
#4	Give the students specific examples
#5	Giving examples
#6	Relate it to something else
#7	Demonstrate it
#8	Say explicitly what you want
Master Teacher	
#1	Analogies and a sense of humor
#2	Analogy
#3	Being a taskmaster
#4	Demonstration or analogy
#5	Making a correlation to something non-musical
#6	Humor
#7	Relate it to something in their lives
#8	Modeling

Survey Question 2 asked, “Describe how important language is to your instruction and what types of language you think are effective during rehearsals.” Fourteen of the fifteen participants viewed language as either very important or important, only novice teacher #8 viewed language as moderately important. When asked which is most important, figurative or analytical, eleven participants chose figurative.

Table 4

*Participants' Summative Answers Regarding How Important Language is to Instruction and What Type of Language is the Most Effective*

Teacher	Answer
Novice Teacher	
#1	Very important. Being clear
#2	Very important. Being descriptive
#3	Very important. Being clear
#4	Very important. Figurative
#5	Important. Figurative
#6	Important. Figurative
#7	Very important. Figurative
#8	Moderately important. Figurative
Master Teacher	
#1	Very important. Analytical and figurative are equally important
#2	Very important. Figurative
#3	Important. Gave specific analytical examples
#4	Very important. Figurative
#5	Important. Being descriptive
#6	Important. Figurative
#7	Important. Figurative
#8	Important. Figurative

Survey Question 3 asked, “What do you think about figurative language? Is it: 1) Not important at all; 2) Not important; 3) Neither; 4) Important; 5) Very Important.” Four novice teachers rated the importance as a 5 and four rated it as a 4. Six master teachers rated it as a 5 and two teachers rated it as a 4.

Table 5

*Participants’ Answers Regarding the Importance of Figurative Language*

Teacher	Answer
Novice Teacher	
#1	Four
#2	Four
#3	Four
#4	Five
#5	Five
#6	Five
#7	Five
#8	Four
Master Teacher	
#1	Five
#2	Four
#3	Four
#4	Five

#5	Five
#6	Five
#7	Five
#8	Five

### Discussion

To answer the question of why master teachers in this research use more figurative language than novice teachers, the answer may be that through experience, teachers learn figurative language is an efficient way to convey concepts (Jensen, 1988), and this efficiency may lead to using less verbal language thus supporting Wagner and Strul's (1979) observations. When participants were asked Survey Question One, "What do you think is the most effective teaching technique?" only two novice teachers gave a "figurative language" answer where five of the master teachers gave such an answer, (see Table 3). This, again, may be because experience has taught master teachers the usefulness of the teaching tool. It may also be that master teachers all taught in very good programs where less time was spent on notes and rhythms and more time could be spent on playing the music, which lends itself to figurative language and supports Stollak and Alexander's (1998) thought that figurative language helps advance the composer's goals for musicality in the composition. Master teacher #5 provides an example of other master teachers' responses by saying figurative language is a good way to teach because it takes the students "away from the musical thing and making some kind of correlation with some kind of non-musical type thing."

It is important to note that as there were no correct or incorrect responses to the question concerning teaching technique, each response is a valid teaching technique and is what participants believe to be the best teaching skill. What is interesting is most of these master teachers valued figurative language above other teaching techniques such as those mentioned by novice teachers, (i.e. demonstration, breaking the problem down, self-discovery, etc.). This alludes to the novice teachers' lack of understanding that figurative language seems to play a large role in teaching.

Survey Question 2 asked participants if they considered verbal language to be significant and which form, figurative or analytical, to be more important, which resulted in fourteen of the fifteen participants reporting that verbal language is either important or very important (see Table 4). These findings correspond with those of Thurman (1977) who found that verbal language is 40% of good teaching, and with Tait and Haack (1984) who indicate that it is essential to students' understanding. However, when asked to choose between figurative and analytical as the most effective form of verbal language, eleven participants chose figurative. Novice teachers' answers had a common theme; they understood figurative language to be important yet found it difficult to incorporate because of spending the last several years in an academic environment. Novice teacher #5 said, "I'm still in that academic level. That college academic where they say something and you take notes. So I am still kinda in that mind set. I am not used to trying to put different ways to it." Inferred from this teacher's answer is that novice teachers do not have adequate modeling of figurative language from their teachers, although one would think higher education would provide ample opportunities with creative, artistic teachers in ensembles and private studios. Other reasons may be that analytical language is easier to employ because of its straightforward nature, or it may be that novice teachers have a lack of life

experiences, or they are simply not made aware of the value of figurative language as a teaching tool.

Survey Question 3 asked participants specifically about figurative language having them rate it on a Likert-type scale. Rating results were either a 4 or a 5 with more master teachers rating it as a 5 than the novice teachers. Again, this difference may explain that these master teachers understand the effectiveness of figurative language and value its use as a teaching tool. Master teacher #7 stated the importance of figurative language by saying, "I think the most important is figurative language in music, because in my mind, music is a form of communication and obviously a very artistic form. And if you can take what is in here [points to his heart], and give it across to somebody out there through your music, then you communicated something very deep." Master teacher #2 said, "If I can come up with a really good analogy...that they can understand, that means something to the music as well. I think that is one of the best and effective ways." Novice teacher #3 gives a different opinion. He ranked figurative language as a 4 with the following qualification: "but it is not the highest priority in the classroom." Novice teacher #4 also understood his lack of experience with the use of figurative language and commented, "A lot of times that is hard for me...as someone who hasn't had a lot of experience communicating in music."

This study was limited to one state. Suggestions for future study might include repeating this design with a region. Also, a larger, and randomized sample size would make the study more robust. Dividing participants into different categories based on years of experience, rather than using a master teacher label, may also prove informative and shed light on figurative language use as related to years of experience. It would be interesting to identify under what circumstances teachers employ figurative language—for example, if figurative language is used more or less

when the topic is about technical playing issues or when the teacher is talking about musical issues such as phrasing or interpretation. Another inquiry would be investigating if there is a difference in the use of figurative language between choral and instrumental directors. Perhaps the use of text in choral music influences verbal instruction of the music teacher. Other research could focus on students' comprehension following teachers' use of figurative language in an attempt to discover if this helps students understand better and retain information longer.

More research is needed, but figurative language may be one characteristic of a master teacher. It may also need more attention in our preservice programs, as mentioned previously by novice teacher #5, who felt like he was still in the academic world using the lecture format. Tait and Haack (1984) posited,

If we are genuinely concerned with developing the quality of the musical experience we need to explore the language connection . . . language is the essential tool that allows us to conceptualize and think about, to analyze and teach about these vital musical matters that ultimately can take us beyond words. (p. 37)

Maybe this examination of figurative language, and future studies, can help directors hone their craft of music education. With less time for music instruction in schools, it is imperative for teachers to be efficient with their use of language so that developing musicians can progress well. It is also important to help our youngest members of the profession learn from more seasoned veterans about great tools used in music education.

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