Increasing Reading Comprehension Through Comedy, Inference, and Irony

Comedy, irony, and inference all involve points of connection, or relationships. Comedy often involves the existence of secondary relationships that are shifted to in punch lines. Irony, though multifaceted, oftentimes involves totally (or somewhat) unexpected relationships that are marveled over when recognized. And, inference often involves consequential and/or associated relationships that are unstated but expected to be heard and understood. The following will briefly discuss and demonstrate how these three components generally share features that can help many students get over the read-between-the-lines blockade that has stifled so much of their reading fluency skill development to date.

The task of being able to read between the lines is the task of being able to understand what was not said. At least, that’s a stated element of some of the conventional wisdom on the subject. In truth, these unspoken messages were indeed said. They were simply said through implication. Implication can seem like a vague, nebulous concept; however, it is measurably more substantial than it might initially appear. Every implication is an intangible extension of something entirely concrete. Fully hearing the concrete message is the basic key to being able to hear the connected extensions that its suggestion(s) make(s). Importantly, what’s necessary for a student to grasp written implications is the same thing that’s necessary for him to grasp spoken ones – that is, fully understanding...
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and logically following the stated or recognized contexts of a given scenario.

Scenarios don’t have to be lengthy to have clearly recognizable contexts. One-liners qualify. Just ask any good comedian. One-liners are recognized gold mines of humor and jocularity... “Take my wife...please!” In fact, it is precisely this recognition that can help us help our students who just don’t “get it” when they read. If no one laughs at a joke, it is probably because no one “got it.” Likewise, when no one recognizes the implications of a statement, it’s probably because no one “got” the inference, no one heard the connected extension(s).

When humor is objectively analyzed, what becomes clear is this: much of humor is based on shifting a context to create misassumptions which turn out (at times) to be pretty funny: e.g. What time is it when a twelve-year-old solid gold Swiss wristwatch with silver second hands stops working one minute before midnight on New Year’s Eve in the year 2011? Answer – It’s 11:59. Believing the pomp and circumstance of the details that surround a broken watch are important is what creates the faulty context. The punch line instantly removes or shifts that context, making the joke plain and (somewhat) funny.

Additionally, the analysis reveals that irony can be another hilarity producer: e.g. A new employee named Clyde slipped on some marbles and fell down the stairs. This slapstick situation, at best, is mildly humorous. However, when dissected and eviscerated for its ironic bowels, the humor level seems to increase. Observe this sequence:

**Tammy:** Tara, somebody slipped and fell down the stairs!

**Tara:** (curiously) Really? Who was it?

**Tammy:** (matter-of-factly) Our newest employee, Clyde.
Tara: (musing) What does Clyde do around here?
Tammy: (with a smirk) He's our new safety expert.
Narrator: (Both ladies laughed out loud.)

Dissecting ironic statements or situations to discover and explain their humor is a very direct and productive means of teaching students to recognize and grasp many kinds of inference. Thus, many students could conceivably laugh their way to inferential reading competency. Of course all ironic depictions aren’t designed to be humorous. Many are designed to inferentially make substantial points about unstated and often-times serious events. Many times these events appear to be fateful, still others simply relate messages that counter or in some way complement others, adding meaningful depth to the original message such that it then has a dual meaning. Or, it adds a starkly different message altogether by demonstrating the presence and applicability of a completely different context. Regardless, the probing process of analysis still triggers the onset of insight for the student. During the process of analyzing and explaining why ironic statements can be called ironic at all, even struggling readers begin to have more of the “I get it” moments that non-struggling students have!

The ability to infer is enabled by the ability to see the full significance of select words and statements and what their combinations might logically suggest. It involves the deep knowledge and instant recognition of backgrounds, contexts, and relationships that typify certain situations and episodes. There are things that always go together! There are things that always impact other things in totally predictable ways! There are things that always react to specific stimuli in precisely prescribed manners, with no exceptions! This is demonstrated with crystal clarity in our science laboratories. Any scientist with actual credentials can predict with
absolute certainty what will happen if one breathe some measured portion of oxygen as opposed to breathing a measured portion of ozone! Even though there's but an atom of difference between them, $O_2 \neq O_3$! In the same way, a person conversant in social circumstances can predict with the same degree of certainty the consequential elements of virtually every kind of social encounter; however, one not so versed in discerning the dynamics of this consequential context simply can’t! Asking a teenager her actual age is a good conversation starter; however, asking her mother her actual age is a good conversation ender!

The ability to match a career to a place of work and predict impacts that one known entity might have on another known entity is central to learning to infer and imply accurately. e.g. Connecting doctors and nurses with hospitals, or teachers and principals with school sites is a simplistic testimony to the skill set necessary to draw reasonable conclusions about typical outcomes and scenarios. An extension of the example is this: with which of the two aforementioned groups would you logically associate a student? The obvious choice is teachers and principals. With which group, then, would you associate a sick student? Note the answer is obviously both! Inference is possible only when a level of in-depth knowledge of basic relationships is present. With that being said, imagine how difficult it would be for a student with limited background knowledge of a culture and/or limited knowledge of the vocabulary that’s often used in that culture, to properly infer an outcome based on conversations or interactions of characters from that culture! The consequential context of such a scenario would be alien to him! And, the expectation that he should be able to infer anything in such a situation would be an unreasonable one indeed.

Many times basic relationships between and among elements are not obvious simply because some students haven’t experienced them
enough! The remedy, in some cases, is to simply repeatedly expose them to similar situations, or have them to take the time to think about what’s present, and consciously connect the dots. Activities that require students to think about and analyze relationships, to just discover how everything is related to everything else is all that’s needed to begin the process of deciphering many key relationships that can aid and abet their attainment of skill sets necessary to infer and imply on a native level!

Often, the concept of deep structure* is under-considered by those who search wholly for academic cures to treat those who are in part socially afflicted! Surely, there is a relationship between the two; but, a relationship does not signal absolute sameness! While we must continue to encourage our non-native students to maintain the noblest aspects of their indigenous cultures, we must not relent in our due diligence to fully acculturate or (in our specific case) Americanize them, especially if our educational system is going to continue to design our basic diagnostic instruments and evaluative academic measures with the tokens of quintessential Americana as their dominant components!

* A proposition that includes the notion that the deep and innate awareness that a native resident would have of the environment in which he grew is vastly more inclusive of subtleties and intangibles than a non-native could ever imagine. And, these subtleties and intangibles often, if not always, escape the perusing gaze of the outsiders as well as the careful inspections of the resent pilgrims.