Help Children Learn Skills by Using Figurative Language

by Brett Holt and Tom Ratliffe

When physical education teachers provide skill cues, they do so with the intention of focusing children's attention on a particular aspect of the motor skill to be performed. Teachers make the assumption that the skill cue they have provided will help the student respond quickly and more accurately than the child previously had responded. Secondly, the skill cue, it is presumed by the teacher, will help the child remember the correct way to perform the motor skill. Rarely do physical education teachers notice if their cue was provided to the student in figurative or literal language. This article will explain the types of figurative language and provide examples of how physical education teachers can use figurative cues to help their students learn skills.

Figurative language is the type of language in which "it doesn't mean what it says" (Hawkes, 1972, p.1). The opposite of figurative language, then, is literal language. It can be assumed that if one uses literal language, he or she means exactly what is said or written. Several kinds of figurative language are called simile, metonymy, synecdoche, metaphor, analogy, oxymoron, and personification.

A *simile* is a form of figurative language that suggests the transference between two items, but also explains the transference. The explanation, many times, takes the form of "like" or "as." In the physical education domain, a teacher might say during a gymnastics unit, "jump like a frog." The "like" word draws the comparison between two unrelated items, a person who is to jump and a frog that jumps. At the same time, the similarities are explained through written or verbal expression by using a topic, target, and vehicle. Thus, a simile is created.

Metonymy is when the transference has already occurred and something very closely related is used to stand for or suggest the thing itself. An example of a metonymy in the physical education classroom would be when the teacher uses the term "island" to represent a space on the ground. The teacher might say, "return to your island." In this instance, "island" has replaced gathering place.

Synecdoche, another type of figurative language, refers to a term in which a part represents a whole. For instance, the teacher or coach might state that "he has great hands" to mean that he is good at catching the ball. A part of the catching ability, or "hands," has been substituted to represent the entire catch.

One of the most often used types of figurative language is the *metaphor.* A metaphor is a term used to describe figurative language that replaces and is described in terms of "is" or "was." For instance, a physical education teacher referring to the playing performance of a student during a basketball lesson might say, "Joe is on fire today." Literally, Joe is not burning with flames emanating from his body. Figuratively, though, Joe is playing basketball exceptionally well today. Transference in this case is *personally* associated, typically with people, although *things* can have a personality as well. For instance, a "car that burns up the track" is a case where an object has been associated with the personality of speed. A metaphor, then, is a common part of everyday figurative human speech in which the speaker or writer gives something a name or label that belongs to something else.

The previous examples have all drawn comparisons between two unrelated "objects." In an *analogy*'s case, the comparison involves the "actions." For instance, in the classic view on analogical reasoning, one might draw a comparison between a pen and paper and chalk and a chalkboard. The common ground is a system, and that system is writing: a pen writes on paper and chalk writes on a chalkboard. A sport-related analogy might be to compare the systems of follow-through. A physical education teacher might claim that hitting a golf ball with a follow-through stroke is like batting a baseball with a follow-through swing.

Other types of figurative language include *oxymoron*, in which the speaker uses an opposite to describe the item such as, "sweet sorrow" or "jumbo shrimp;" *personification*, in which a speaker gives something that is non-living qualities of life; and *hyperbole*, in which an extreme exaggeration is given. In the athletic world, a "long second" before the buzzer would be an example of an oxymoron. An example of a personification would be a sports announcer exclaiming, "The bench has come to life," while describing a basketball game. An example of hyperbole is the typical, "My team destroyed your team," which is an over-exaggeration of one team's superior performance.

Though there are numerous subcategories of figurative language, simile, metonymy, synecdoche, personification, hyperbole, and analogy are often referred to collectively as "metaphors" in the physical education literature (Carlson, 2001; Gassner, 1999; Griffey, Housner, & Williams, 1986; Housner & Griffey, 1994) as though they all draw comparisons

Examples for Teachers to Use	
Skill Themes/ Movement Concepts	**Figurative Cue**
Running	"Be light on your feet." "Run tall, as if you had a book on your head." "Relax your face. Lips and face should jiggle like jello."
Vertical jump	"Throw arms to the sky." "Reach for the sky." "Crouch, like you are sitting in a chair."
Leaping	"Cross the creek."
Sliding (game movement)	"Sit in your stance like a bull rider."
Catching	"Catch using soft hands." "Pretend you are catching an egg." "Squeeze the ball as if it were clay."
Throwing	"Keep your eyes on the target." "Follow through just like a rubber band springs back into place." "Release at 2:00 (right-handed)/ at 10:00 (left)."
Throwing (football)	"Grab the top like you're holding a soda-pop can."
Throwing (frisbee)	"Release like snapping a towel."
Kicking	"Extend your leg through the ball." "Swing your leg like the pendulum on a grandfather clock."
Striking (bat)	"Explode through the object."
Striking (racquet)	"Your backhand should resemble the path of a sword being pulled from a scabbard." "Brush crumbs off the table." (forehand) "Shake hands with the racquet."
Balancing	"Be a statue." "Keep your muscles tight like the Hulk." "Look like you are frozen."
Forward roll	"Stay round like a tire." "Push off both feet, as if they were tied together and cannot come apart."
Backward roll	"Keep your knees glued to your chest."
Log roll	"Point your toes like the tip of a pencil."
Volleying	"Extend arms like a basketball chest pass, but point your fingers toward the ceiling." "Shape your hand as if you were holding bowl of cereal."
Dribbling	"Push the ball downward and let it return to your hand as if it were a yo-yo."
Shooting (basketball)	"Make a rainbow or exaggerate your arch." "Finish position of hand should resemble a gooseneck."
Light force	"Travel like you're sneaking through the forest."
Pathways (many/varied)	"Travel in all the different ways the wind can travel."
(zig-zag)	"Travel like lightning."
(curved)	"Travel like a snake."
Continuous free flow	"Make your movements smooth like water running in a river."
Slow speed	"Be slow like a sloth."
Fast speed	"Be fast like a cheetah."
Extensions (far)	"Keep (hands) far from your body as if it/they had a disease."
Levels (low)	"Stay low to the ground like a snake."
Levels (high)	"Be high in the air as if you were a helicopter."

between two seemingly unrelated things or systems. To address this oversight, the following section identifies figurative skill cues that teachers commonly use to teach either skill themes or movement concepts at the elementary level. Although many of these cues can be found in *Teaching Cues for Sports Skills* by Fronske (2001), several are contributions from students and colleagues. See if you can identify the correct figurative form for each expression.

How to Use Figurative Cues

When using figurative language there are a few strategies to keep in mind the following:

1. Check for understanding of the meaning of the cue by asking the student to demonstrate the skill. By demonstrating the skill, the student not only allows the teacher to assess the accuracy of the cue, but also allows the student to concentrate on that cue while performing the particular skill theme or movement concept. In addition, this allows the student to visualize the cue.
2. Try many variations of cues for the same motor skill—some work better for different children.
3. Use one cue at a time so you focus children's attention and don't overwhelm them with too many thoughts.
4. Repeat a cue many times, both during and after the child attempts to perform the skill, to reinforce use of a more mature technique.
5. Stop and correct if needed, or reinforce more mature performance. Incorporating cues in the teaching process helps teachers identify any major inaccuracies quickly (Fronske, 2001). Teachers who use skill cues may find it easier to focus on technical components while assessing the performance of their students.
6. Ask children to restate the cue frequently to insure they are remembering and using the cue.

Summary

Although most teachers have not stopped to consider whether they are using *figurative* language or *literal* language to deliver skill cues, it is obvious many widely used skill cues are presented in figurative form. Using figurative cues can "catch" students' attention and help them learn skills more effectively.

References

Carlson, T.B. (2001). Using metaphors to enhance reflectiveness among preservice teachers. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance,* **72** (1), 49-53.

Fronske, H. (2001). *Teaching cues for sport skills* (2nd ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Gassner, G.J. (1999). Using metaphors for high performance teaching and coaching. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, **70** (7), 33-35.

Griffey, D. C., Housner, L. D., & Williams, D. (1986). Coaches use of non-literal language: Metaphor as a means of effective teaching. In M. Pieron & G. Graham (Eds.), *The 1984 Olympic scientific congress proceedings* (pp. 131-137). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Hawkes, T. (1972). *Metaphor.* Fakenham, Norfolk: Cox & Wyman Ltd.

Housner, L.D., & Griffey, D.C. (1994). Wax on, wax off: Pedagogical content knowledge in motor skill instruction. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, **65** (2), 63-69.

© 2004 Human Kinetics