Famous Quotes for Theme Analysis

by CECILIA GREGG

Theme analysis requires students to examine information and isolate patterns—or themes—to determine meaning. Analyzing themes from written material helps English language learners practice and demonstrate higher-level critical-thinking skills. I find that students crave participating in engaging group activities and want to discuss personally meaningful topics, like interpersonal relationships, social and cultural issues, and current events that affect them.

One of my goals is to provide memorable, relevant activities—like this theme-analysis task—that motivate students and encourage them to look at the world from new vantage points. As an English Language Fellow at Hebron University in the West Bank, I have used this activity with students who are generally 18 to 20 years old. Their English proficiency level is low to midrange; however, the activity can be used with students at all levels.

SELECTING QUOTES

Finding suitable quotes for students to analyze in this activity is an easy task for both teachers and students, as there are hundreds of websites dedicated to the collection of quotations. Teachers can select the quotes based on current or past class objectives and topics; choose quotes from various authors, personal heroes, religious figures, philosophers, or politicians; and use quotes from English songs or movies. Teachers can also involve the students in the quote-selection process. Figure 1 suggests tips for finding quotes.

In selecting quotes for the activity, teachers must consider students' vocabulary, comprehension level, and interest. For low-level students, quotes should be shorter and/or simpler, and themes may be limited. Here is a quote from John Muir, a conservationist, writer, and activist, that may be suitable for students at the low or intermediate level:

> **"When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."**

Students need to understand the concept of "universe" and vocabulary like *hitched* to analyze the quote effectively. As teachers, we want to encourage students to learn new words and stretch their English-language boundaries. Teachers should select quotes that build on the existing knowledge of students and challenge them with new concepts. Themes that could emerge from an analysis of this quote include community, interconnectedness, and even faith. Again,

Websites that list quotes vary widely. Typical online searches can yield results for general and specific quotes. For example, search "quotes from children's literature" or "inspirational quotes" for a variety of quotes to use for this activity; you can also search for quotes from movies, quotes by a specific person, or quotes about a topic that is relevant and of interest to your students.

Textbooks, journal articles, videos, and other classroom materials are also sources of quotes. From time to time, popular magazines and online journals provide top quotes. Additionally, social-media sites are sources of quotes to use for theme analysis.

Figure 1. Tips for finding quotes

> **When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.**

these ideas should not be too far outside the scope of the students' language capacity.

THEME-ANALYSIS PROCESS

Although there are many ways to analyze a quote, the "paraphrase, review, and evaluate" approach is useful. In low-level classrooms, students first try to understand the quote and paraphrase it in their own words. Paraphrasing allows the student to identify main ideas of the quote and demonstrate understanding of the context. Once a student has completed the paraphrasing step, the teacher can provide feedback and ask critical-thinking questions, which can guide the student toward deeper understanding.

Next, students can review the quote and note the tone, mood, diction, and figurative language. By exploring the literary elements of the quote, students begin to understand the meaning of the quote from the author's perspective. Again, the teacher can provide input to ensure that the student analysis is on track.

Finally, students evaluate the quote and identify the author's intended message to the reader. In this stage, students can provide a written summary of the quote, identifying key messages. The teacher again plays a supporting role in the process, providing feedback and assisting students in the theme analysis.

With high-level students, a less-structured approach is favorable. Because student comprehension levels are higher, the step-by-step approach may not be needed. Using a simple "Who, What, When, Why, Where?" approach may be enough. Students can use this approach to gain insight into the quote and the intended meaning of the author by answering the *Wh–* questions. High-level students can also articulate sophisticated concepts by identifying, selecting, and defending their ideas and perspectives about the quotes, based on their own experience and ideas about the relevant themes.

I have used the following quote from Henry David Thoreau in the theme-analysis activity:

> **"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."**

I selected the quote because it focuses on objectives identified in the comparative literature course with which I was working. Because students were puzzled by the meaning of *front* as used in this quote, they used their dictionaries to bring meaning to the word in the context of the quote. Throughout the activity, I provided feedback by asking students their ideas and gently guiding them. After the individual process was complete, I answered questions and helped student groups through an analysis process, where all students shared their ideas. Once the analysis was complete, students determined that the theme of the quote was "living life fully."

Another quote I have used is the following, from Mark Victor Hansen, a motivational speaker and author:

> **"Don't wait until everything is just right. It will never be perfect. There will always be challenges, obstacles and less than perfect conditions. So what. Get started now. With each step you take,**

you will grow stronger and stronger, more and more skilled, more and more self-confident and more and more successful."

I found this quote through an Internet search and selected it based on a teaching goal to inspire students to overcome challenges. Students used the "paraphrase, review, and evaluate" approach to analyze the quote, first individually and then collectively. They used their dictionaries to review the words *obstacles* and *self-confident*. I provided feedback, and after the group discussion, students decided that the overarching theme for this quote was "[free] will."

Other themes that emerged from the quote-analysis activity were freedom, love, friendship, and [positive] attitude. The activity was a fun way for students to use their conversation skills, in a group setting, to discuss the thoughts of literary figures, religious leaders, and political leaders. Students also used reading, writing, collaborative, and critical-thinking skills. During the activity, they worked alone and in groups. They reported that the activity provided them with a new outlet for reviewing written material and literature, and they mentioned that the activity could be used in various academic and personal contexts, such as song-lyric analysis.

PREPARATION

The activity requires minimal supplies and technology. Supplies include quotes, handwritten or typed on slips of paper, on a range of topics aligned with class objectives. It is also helpful to have dictionaries, pens, paper, and, of course, interested students. The quotes should include both familiar and unfamiliar vocabulary; including a range of vocabulary words encourages students to use their dictionaries and learn new vocabulary. A goal of the activity should be to increase student comprehension of the theme-analysis process and content of the quotes.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Find five or more quotes. Select them based on the English proficiency level of the students, course objectives, and topics of interest. Quotes should include some vocabulary that students are not familiar with.

2. Write or type the quotes on slips of paper. Make enough copies so each student will have his or her own copy of the quote. For instance, if you have 25 students and you are using five quotes, make five copies of each quote.

3. Randomly hand out a quote to each student, distributing the quotes so that roughly an equal number of students are assigned to each quote.

4. Give students about five minutes to read the quote, work through an analysis process, and use the dictionary to look up words with which they are unfamiliar. The initial review of the quote should be an individual activity for students.

5. Provide feedback to students about their understanding of the quotes and guide them by asking critical-thinking questions such as, "What message do you think the person was trying to convey?"; "What did this quote make you think of when you first read it?"; and "When you read the quote, how do you feel, and why do you feel that way?"

6. Ask students to individually write the definitions of new vocabulary and the meaning of the quote in their own words.

7. Group students according to the quotes. There should be five (or more) groups, and each student in the group should have reviewed the same quote.

8. Give students about ten minutes to discuss their personal understanding

of the quote with group members. Students should also discuss the meaning of vocabulary that is new to them.

9. Ask students to work as a group to write their understanding of the quote and determine a theme for the quote.

10. Ask each group to present its findings to the class by reading the quote, identifying one new vocabulary word, and suggesting a theme for the quote.

11. While each group is presenting, the other students should summarize the presentations by writing down a few brief sentences or ideas. This helps all students stay focused during the activity and get the benefit of the lesson.

REFLECTION

Quote analysis is a worthwhile and enjoyable stand-alone activity; it can also be a starting point for other activities. For example, after the initial quote analysis, the teacher can ask students to do any or all of the following:

• Write a dialogue about a theme identified in the initial quotes.

• Create skits using the themes identified in the initial quotes.

• Recall vocabulary from each presentation.

• Research the context or authors of the quotes.

• Create a visual representation of a quote.

• Write a new, meaningful quote with a theme of their choice.

• Analyze the group process, considering the stages of working in a team setting.

> **There will always be challenges, obstacles and less than perfect conditions. So what. Get started now.**

The activity can be repeated with additional quotes from different authors, genres, time periods, or themes. It can be reflective, based on content covered in previous lessons, or it can be forward-focused, introducing new topics and objectives.

In addition to improving group skills, this activity can strengthen conversation, dictionary-use, reading, writing, and critical-thinking skills, and it encourages students to think and learn in an innovative way.

Cecilia Gregg earned her doctorate degree in Education from University of Phoenix. Cecilia has also studied business, psychology, and TEFL. She enjoys living in the West Bank, and prior to her work as an English Language Fellow, Cecilia served in the U.S. Peace Corps in Chongqing, China, and taught at Arizona State University and University of Phoenix.