The Connotation Lesson

Lesson Objective: Students will define connotation; identify words with positive, negative, and neutral connotations; and understand how word choice affects the mood of a text.

Language Objective: Students will read and determine the mood of a passage by recognizing the connotations of the words in the passage.

Standard(s) Addressed:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.8.5c Distinguish among the connotations (associations) of words with similar denotations (definitions) (e.g., bullheaded, willful, firm, persistent, resolute).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

Anticipatory Set

The teacher waits at the door. As the students enter, the teacher gives each one a nametag with a different word on it, saying, “Stick this on your left shoulder. Take a seat.” The 36 students sit in desk pods of four—there are nine pods in the room. On top of each pod is a definition. Once the students sit, the teacher gives them instructions: “Everyone look at his or her nametag. Does anyone not know the meaning of his or her word?” If a student doesn’t know the definition of her word, the teacher asks the class if someone else can explain the word to her. Once the unknown words have been defined, the teacher gives the next set of directions: “You have three tasks. First, every group of desks has a definition on it. Find the group of desks with the definition that matches your word and sit there. Second. Determine which words in your group have a positive, negative, or neutral feeling attached to them. Third, choose one person to write your words and their feelings on the board. You have twelve minutes. Go.” The students then seek the pod with the denotative definition that matches their word, effectively sorting themselves into groups of synonyms with the same denotative definition but different connotative definitions, and begin to identify the feelings they associate with their words. After a representative from each group writes the words on the board, the teacher asks the class, “How did we do? What was hard about these tasks? Does anyone disagree with anyone else’s list?”

The Word List:

Denotative Definition: Of, like a child; not fully developed
Nametags: Immature, youthful, childish, child-like

Denotative Definition: Having the ability to reason and understand; insightful
Nametags: Wise, shrewd, cunning, intelligent

Denotative Definition: Having a small waist; not thick
Nametags: Thin, skinny, slender, slim

Denotative Definition: Free from tension or anxiety; laid back
Nametags: Carefree, lazy, careless, easy-going

Denotative Definition: Inclined to talk a great deal
Nametags: Talkative, chatty, noisy, conversational

Denotative Definition: Having belief in one’s own abilities
Nametags: Self-confident, self-secure, arrogant, proud

Definition: Daring; fearless in action
Nametags: Bold, reckless, rash, courageous

Definition: An older person; grandfather
Nametags: Elderly person, old man, senior citizen, curmudgeon

Definition: Messy or covered in dirt; not well-organized
Nametags: Untidy, filthy, unclean, dirty

**Perceived Objective and Purpose**

“Throughout this week, we’ve been discussing the different choices confronted by an author before writing. Today we encounter a third choice: “What sort of diction do I use to tell this story?” One method of selecting words is to look at the connotation of a word. What is connotation? By exploring how the word on your nametag makes you feel, you are actually exploring the connotative definition of that word—the associations you have with that word. Authors choose words with different connotations to change the way their writing feels; to change the mood of their writing. So our task is to make sure we understand how to determine the connotation of a word, and explore how and why different connotations affect a story’s mood.”

**Input**

The teacher passes around a small handout, then asks students to “whip out” their notebooks, turn to a fresh page, and tape the handout into their notes. The handout defines connotation, as well as “the Best Friend Test”—which will help students identify whether a word is positive, negative, or neutral (see The Handout below). The teacher asks a student to read the handout aloud, and then asks, “How would knowing the Best Friend Test have helped you during the opening activity? Can anyone give me an example of how the Best Friend Test works using his
or her nametag?” Next, the teacher says, “Now we know what connotation is, and how to determine the connotation of a word—but why? What is the point of all of this? How does understanding connotation help us as readers, writers, and people?” The teacher collects student responses on an anchor chart, encouraging the students to learn from each other and write down each other’s answers beneath the handout. The teacher adds, “Understanding connotation helps us understand the power of language—how one little word can make a big difference.

Understanding connotation helps us choose wisely our words when we’re writing or speaking to our parents, our friends, and our teachers, as well as ensure that our language is appropriate for the context and not offensive. Finally, understanding connotation helps us understand the choices authors make when picking words to write, and how those words create or enhance the story’s mood.”

The Handout:

- Connotation: an idea or feeling associated with a word in addition to its dictionary definition.
- The Best Friend Test: “If someone were to call my best friend this word, would I be happy or offended for my best friend?”

The teacher shows two one-minute film clips from the movie, “500 Days of Summer,” with English subtitles. The first is a monologue from the narrator—a young man newly in love with a young woman named Summer. He begins, “I love Summer,” and then describes her hair, teeth, laugh, smile, knees, birthmark, etc., using words with a positive connotation (“I love the heart-shaped birthmark on her neck”). The second clip occurs 40 minutes later in the film, and is also a monologue from the same young man, newly heartbroken by Summer. He begins, “I hate Summer,” and then proceeds to describe the exact same things (hair, teeth, laugh, smile, etc.) using words with a negative connotation (“I hate the cockroach-shaped splotch on her neck”). Afterward, the teacher asks students, “What are some of the things you noticed? How did the screenwriter of this movie use connotation to help us know how the main character is feeling? How did the mood in the first scene differ from the mood in the second scene?”

Modeling

To better understand how an author chooses words with certain connotations to create mood, students partake in a “Character Switch”—an activity using characters from Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone. First, the students read a description of a character provided by J.K. Rowling. Then, the students determine which adjectives in the description create the mood of the character. Finally, the students replace the adjectives with words that possess the same meaning but a different connotation and see how the character changes. The teacher models the activity using the Elmo—“thinking aloud” to reveal her thought process to the students: “Here is a description of Professor Snape. It says he has ‘greasy black hair, a hooked nose, and sallow skin.’ Wow. He seems like a nasty character. But why? Well, the author chose the adjectives ‘greasy,’ ‘hooked,’ and ‘sallow’ to describe him—and all three of those words have a negative connotation. What would happen if I were to make Snape seem attractive? What’s another word for ‘greasy’? Hm. ‘Shiny.’ What about ‘hooked’? Maybe ‘finely curved.’ And ‘sallow’? How about ‘porcelain’? So now we have Snape, a professor with shiny black hair, a finely curved
nose, and porcelain skin. He almost sounds handsome—and certainly not creepy.” The teacher then presents the students with three tasks to do with their shoulder partner: make Dumbledore seem weak, make Dudley seem handsome, and make Mrs. Figg seem fun and interesting. The description paragraphs for each of the three characters will projected using the Elmo. As the students work, the teacher walks around to see how they’re doing, if they need help, and if their work reflects that they understand how to use connotation to change mood. After fifteen minutes, the teacher tell the class to “come up for air” and call on pairs of students willing to share their paragraphs.

Character Switch:

**Let’s make Snape seem attractive:**
“Harry, who was starting to feel warm and sleepy, looked up at the High Table again. Hagrid was drinking deeply from his goblet. Professor McGonagall was talking to Professor Dumbledore. Professor Quirrell, in his absurd turban, was talking to a teacher with greasy black hair, a hooked nose, and sallow skin” (Rowling, 1998).

**Let’s make Dumbledore seem weak.**
“Nothing like this man had ever been seen on Privet Drive. He was tall, thin, and very old, judging by the silver of his hair and beard, which were both long enough to tuck into his belt. He was wearing long robes, a purple cloak that swept the ground, and high-heeled, buckled boots. His blue eyes were light, bright, and sparkling behind half-moon spectacles and his nose was very long and crooked, as though it had been broken at least twice. This man’s name was Albus Dumbledore” (Rowling, 1998).

**Let’s make Dudley seem handsome.**
“He had a large pink face, not much neck, small, watery blue eyes, and thick blond hair that lay smoothly on his thick, fat head. Aunt Petunia often said that Dudley looked like a baby angel — Harry often said that Dudley looked like a pig in a wig” (Rowling, 1998).

**Let’s make Mrs. Figg seem fun and interesting.**
“Every year on Dudley’s birthday, his parents took him and a friend out for the day, to adventure parks, hamburger restaurants, or the movies. Every year, Harry was left behind with Mrs. Figg, a mad old lady who lived two streets away. Harry hated it there. The whole house smelled of cabbage and Mrs. Figg made him look at photographs of all the cats she’d ever owned” (Rowling, 1998).

Reference:

**Check for Understanding + Guided Practice**

The teacher incorporates both a ‘check for understanding’ and ‘guided practice’ into the “Character Switch” activity.

**Independent Practice (Assessment)**
The teacher verbally assigns the students’ homework. They must select a one-page passage in their SSR novels, determine the mood of the passage by identifying the connotation of at least ten words used, and then rewrite the passage using words with the same definition but a different connotation to create a new mood—as though the students were the authors of the novel, experimenting with diction. All of this should be done in their notebook, and should include the title of the student’s SSR novel, as well as the page number of the passage.

Rubric:

SSR novel:
Page number of passage:

1. Original mood identified: Yes No
2. Ten words selected: Yes No
3. New mood defined: Yes No
4. New mood consistent: Yes No
5. Paragraph coherent: Yes No

Each question is worth two points. The entire assignment, as a homework grade, is worth ten points.

Closure: With five minutes left, the teacher finishes class with an “Ask Your Neighbor” exit ticket. Everyone takes out a note card and writes down one thing he or she still feels unclear about in today’s lesson. The students pass the note cards around the group and, if anyone else in the group can provide clarity, that person shares with the whole group. If no one can provide clarity, they turn the cards into the teacher to address tomorrow.

Differentiation: This lesson balances kinesthetic learning, cooperative learning, inquiry-based learning, and student-centered learning in order to reach students with diverse needs and interests. Each activity includes a visual for students who struggle with auditory learning. In the opening activity, for instance, the groups write their words and whether the word is positive, negative, or neutral on the board. During the input, the students receive a handout, and the teacher writes student responses on an anchor chart so everyone can follow along with the class discussion. The teacher selects subtitles for the film clips so EL students can hear the English while simultaneously reading the English. Furthermore, the teacher incorporates movement in the opening activity for students who struggle to sit still. Students benefit from the assistance of the others in their pod and the space created in the lesson for cooperative learning: during the opening activity and the Character Switch, as well as with the “Ask Your Neighbor” exit ticket. The independent practice, which also serves as the assessment, allows students to use their SSR novels, aligned with their personal reading level and with their interests. Finally, throughout the opening activity and the Character Switch, the teacher walks around and “workshop” with the students as they work—allowing for individual adjustment as needed.