

Teaching Close Reading Skills in a Large Lecture Course



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ABSTRACT

Close reading is a very detailed analysis of a text, which includes commentary on such formal features as meter, theme, imagery, figurative language, rhetorical strategies, tone, and diction. It is a skill necessary to the serious engagement with literature of all periods and central to students' intellectual development, regardless of their major. This poster presents strategies for giving students in a large (120 students) British literature survey course significant opportunities to practice close reading—in ways that do not create an overwhelming burden for the instructors.

Repeated Practice Advances Close Reading Skills

In lecture

- Lecturer demonstrated close reading skills
- Students participated orally as a class in analyzing specific textual details
- Students participated orally in close reading exercises in small peer groups

In discussion sections

- GSI's demonstrated close reading skills
- Students participated in close reading exercises in whole-class and small groups
- Students developed explicit strategies and guidelines for close reading
- At the end of the term, each student presented a handout detailing the close reading strategies they found most useful

Out of class

- Students took weekly objective online quizzes to master relevant content and terminology
- Students regularly wrote objective quiz questions, which encouraged them to review and synthesize material
- Students wrote weekly posts on CTools Forum, raising questions and ideas that would be explored in discussion sections
- Students took three online essay quizzes to practice close reading skills and get the instructor's feedback before major essays
- Students wrote two formal essays demonstrating their close reading skills

Selected References

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KEY QUESTIONS

- Does repeated practice develop students' close reading skills?
- From an instructional perspective, can additional writing be assigned without a commensurate increase in grading time?

Close Reading Rubric

Progress in close reading was assessed through three on-line close-reading quizzes that were graded electronically using a 6-point rubric (Figure 1) and brief GSI comments. The close reading grading rubric enabled instructors to diagnose quickly students' different skill levels and to give relevant feedback to students individually and as a group.

0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-responsive to the question (e.g., a fragment or an unrelated original poem)
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relies on summary and/or paraphrase rather than analysis Tends to be impressionistic Contains overly generalized conclusions
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mixes analysis with summary Notifies some details but is more likely to deliver impressionistic conclusions than analysis Contains some overly generalized points Attempts to use literary terminology and engage with formal features (such as poetic devices, meter, etc.), but may err in doing so
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develops good analysis connecting literary details to specific conclusions Occasionally offers overly general or impressionistic remarks Is attentive to details and nuances of language Shows occasional errors in use of literary terminology and/or identification of formal features May perceive relation of passage to larger structure/theme of work.
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offers good if not fully developed analysis of details and nuances of language Pays good attention to details and nuances of formal features Demonstrates good sense of literary evidence Uses terminology correctly for the most part, though minor errors may appear May tie reading of passage to larger context of work at hand and/or other works
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marked by analytical originality and specificity Pays excellent attention to details and nuances of formal features Demonstrates evidence for cogent conclusions Shows awareness of layers of meaning and tensions among formal features of language Ties reading of passage to larger themes and tendencies of work at hand and/or to other works

Figure 1: Rubric

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

- Repeated practice develops students' close reading skills.
- The course was writing intensive, not grading intensive. Without requiring a great deal of written feedback, students' performance on quizzes served an important diagnostic function, revealing to the entire instructional team both the general level of skill and the range of skills within the class.
- The close reading rubric is a useful tool for giving undergraduates clear signposts about their developing skills and areas that could use improvement.

Close Reading Quiz Comparison

A comparison of quiz performance over the course of the semester demonstrates clear improvement in students' close reading skills (Figure 2).

- First quiz:** 57% of students were working at the 1 level. Their responses were often plot summaries or vague and impressionistic observations.
- Second quiz:** Only 23% of students remained at the 1 level. 46% earned 2s by including analytical elements in their responses. The remaining 30%—over twice the number for the first quiz—incorporated good analysis and evidence, earning scores of 3 or above.
- Third quiz:** 22% of students remained at the 1 level and 38% at the 2 level. Definite improvement was seen in the number of students who made clear arguments supported by detailed textual analysis, with 39% earning a 3 or above.

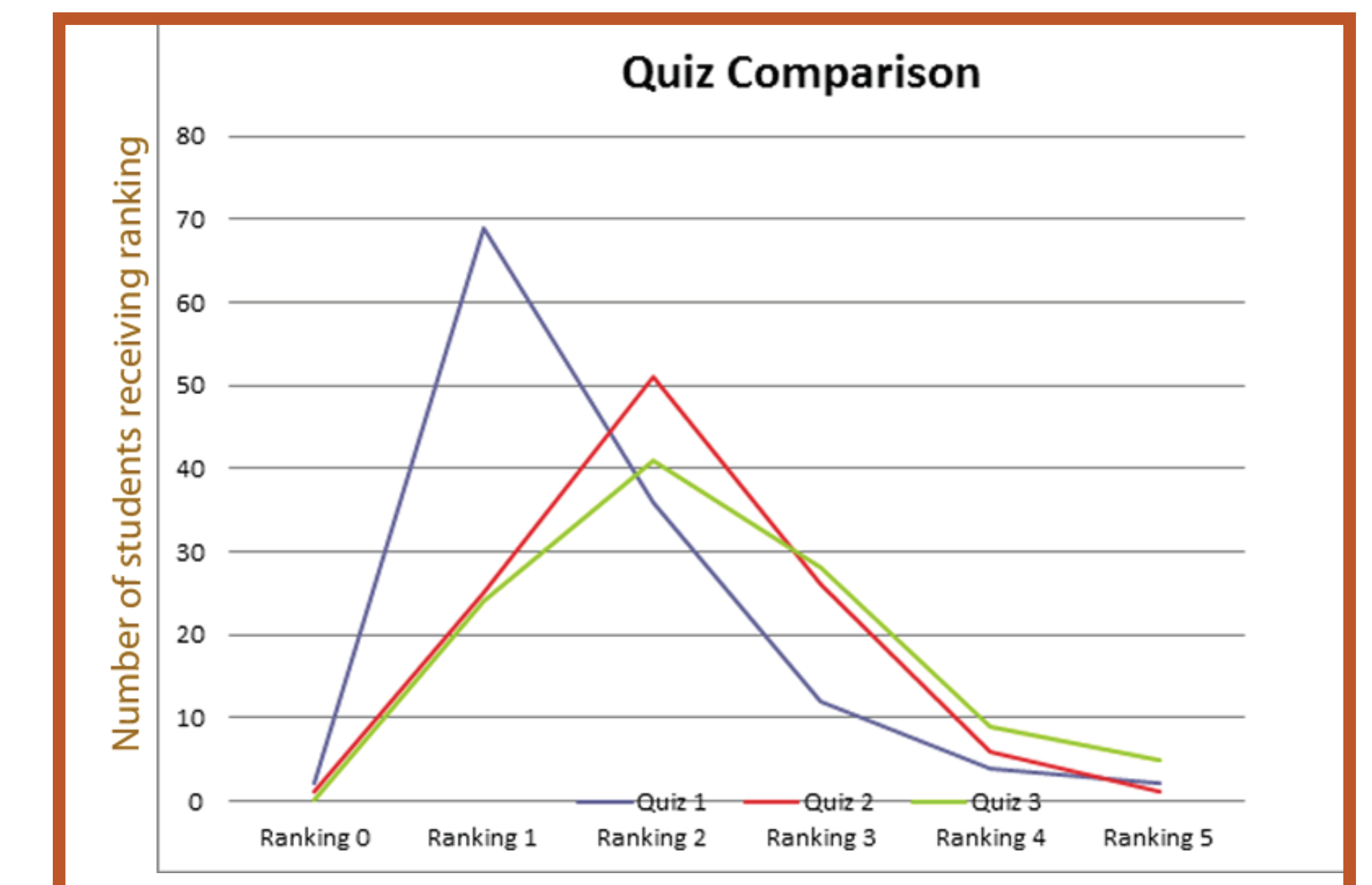


Figure 2: Rubric Scores for Quiz#1-3: *125 students completed the first quiz; 110 completed the second; and 107, the third.

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