This chapter sketches out a research base for word play in the classroom based on four principles: (1) Word play is motivating and an important component of the word-rich classroom; (2) word play calls on students to reflect metacognitively on words, word parts, and context; (3) word play requires students to be active learners and capitalizes on possibilities for social construction of meaning; and (4) word play develops domains of word meaning and relatedness as it engages students in practice and rehearsal of words. Each principle is examined in turn, and then exemplars of word play and supporting scaffolding are presented. The chapter concludes with options for web-based word play as well as other resources.

The title of this chapter comes from a teacher participating in staff development on word play who noted, “Well, this puts some of the ‘fun’ back in fundamental. Vocabulary instruction can be pretty grim sometimes.” This comment dovetailed with our own experiences in working with reluctant readers in clinics and classrooms where word play proved to be a powerful...
learning and motivation tool, particularly for children whose home experiences do not involve linguistic play. These two observations helped us set the first goal of this chapter—to link word play and the development of word awareness in students with the research on metacognition and vocabulary instruction. In this age of evidence-based practice, such a link is needed for teachers to ground the inclusion of word play in the curriculum. Our stimulus came from reviews of vocabulary instruction and development that emphasized the importance of vocabulary (Baumann, Kame’enui, & Ash, 2003), suggested that researchers address the application of vocabulary research to teachers’ practical problems (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2001), and that vocabulary learning should be emphasized as a metacognitive activity (Nagy & Scott, 2001). From the work we review, we propose research-based principles for using word play in the classroom. Our second goal is to share some examples of instruction consistent with these principles and discuss the ways in which they develop effective strategies, good habits, and the love of words in learners.

THE RESEARCH BASE FOR WORD PLAY IN THE CLASSROOM

We believe the evidence base supports using word play in the classroom. Our belief relates to these four research-grounded statements about word play:

- Word play is motivating and an important component of the word-rich classroom.
- Word play calls on students to reflect metacognitively on words, word parts, and context.
- Word play requires students to be active learners and capitalizes on possibilities for the social construction of meaning.
- Word play develops domains of word meaning and relatedness as it engages students in practice and rehearsal of words.

Word Play, Motivation, and the Word-Rich Classroom

All teachers know the motivational value of play. Things we enjoy and view as sources of pleasure stay with us throughout our lives. The motivated learner is the engaged learner who has a personal sense of self-confidence in participating in learning activities (Au, 1997), participates in a knowledgeable and strategic fashion, and is socially interactive (Guthrie & Wigfield, 1997). This engagement and enjoyment is highly correlated with achievement in all areas of literacy (Campbell, Voelkl, & Donahue, 1997) includ-
ing vocabulary learning. In one highly controlled study of vocabulary learning in the middle grades (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982), a curious phenomenon surfaced. Out of all the classrooms involved in the research project, students in one classroom learned more incidental vocabulary—words no one was attempting to teach. When trying to locate the source of this learning, the researchers were unable to come up with any instruction or materials that could account for the difference. Then one researcher noted a poster of interesting words in the classroom. When the teacher was asked about it, she noted that it was the “word wall”—a place where students could write new words they encountered in reading, in conversation, on TV, or in their daily experiences. If they could write the word, talk about where they heard or saw it, and use it, they received points in a class contest. Very little expense, instructional time, or effort was involved, but the students became “tuned in” to learning new words in a way that positively affected their learning. They actively watched and listened for new words and shared them with their peers. They were motivated word learners.

Self-direction is an important component of motivation. With students who are English language learners, some degree of choice about word learning is important. Jiminez (1997) found that middle school readers were more motivated and learned more vocabulary when they could have a say in selecting some of the words they were to learn. Using the Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy (Haggard, 1982), a strategy that helps students develop selection and learning strategies, motivated students to say, “I used to only think about vocabulary in school. The whole world is vocabulary” and “I hear words everywhere that would be good to use” (Ruddell & Shearer, 2002, p. 352). Self-selection does not water down vocabulary learning in the classroom. Fourth-grade students allowed to choose words to learn from a novel study unit chose words of greater difficulty than graded word lists would have provided them, and then they learned the words they selected (Fisher, Blachowicz, & Smith, 1991). Personal interest and choice are powerful aides to vocabulary learning.

Word play is also one element of the word-rich classroom so critical to the development of word awareness and word consciousness in students: the same consciousness that leads to greater incidental word learning. There is significant research base for having a word-rich environment in the classroom and for the development of word-aware learners. The need to increase student exposure to vocabulary is well established. Students from families entering preschool who have many opportunities for oral interactions have larger vocabularies than children who have limited interactions (Hart & Risley, 1995). The latter often lag behind in reading so that by third grade their exposure to new vocabulary through reading has been impoverished as well (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). All these result in
learners who, by fourth grade, have much smaller vocabularies than their peers (Becker, 1977).

All students need to be surrounded by words and motivated to learn them. Reading to students is a must to expose them to vocabulary they would not encounter on their own. Just as teachers have begun to use the term “flood of books” to talk about situations where students have many and varied opportunities to read (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988), so, too, “flood of words” is an important issue for general vocabulary development.

Wide reading is another hallmark of word learning, with many studies suggesting that word learning occurs normally and incidentally during normal reading (Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985). Reading to children has been shown to have an effect not only on their recognition knowledge of new words but also on their ability to use these words in their own retellings (Dickinson & Smith, 1995); so a wide variety of materials used for reading to children and for their own reading is necessary to develop the word-rich classroom. Word play can round out the word-rich classroom by providing another way to encounter, practice, and become interested in these building blocks of literacy.

**Metacognition and Word Play**

*Question:* What vehicle do you use to take a pig to the hospital?

*Answer:* A hambulance, of course.

Corny? Yes. Metacognitive? Definitely. Anyone who understands the pun has performed a metacognitive act. First there must be the association of *ham* with *pig*, the segmenting of the first syllable of *ambulance* and replacing it with the syllable *ham*, and then using the meaning of *ambulance* as a vehicle for hospital transport. The groan or laugh that results is our metacognitive check. We get the joke and we exhibit cognitive flexibility, the ability to look at the same thing in different ways. Many children, however, don’t get it. Watch a child react to a book like *The King Who Rained* (Gwynne, 1970), which focuses on humorous interpretations of various expressions. Some students interpret the expressions literally. They don’t have the knowledge to draw on for word meaning, nor do they have the flexibility to think about words and word parts in more than one way. So a joke about having a “frog in my throat” is horrifying rather than funny. Creating and sharing jokes, riddles, and puns can help develop this flexibility.

Traditionally, vocabulary instruction has focused on learning meanings of words (Watts, 1995). Words are considered individually, not in a domain or context, and the learning is typically receptive, not constructive. Students are either given a definition or asked to look one up, often resulting
in hilarious mistakes, as the young girl who described an acute angle as “a very good looking angle.” An alternative approach is to consider vocabulary instruction as metalinguistic development (Nagy & Scott, 2001). The ability to reflect on, manipulate, combine, and recombine the components of words is an important part of vocabulary learning (Tunmer, Herriman, & Nesdale, 1988). Phonological awareness (being able to segment speech sounds, such as removing am from ambulance), morphological awareness (the awareness of word-part meanings), and syntactic awareness (how a word functions in language) all play important parts in word learning (Carlisle, 1995). There is also evidence that this type of learning is developmental over the school years (Anglin, 1993; Roth, Speece, Cooper, & De la Paz, 1996).

Using morphology along with context is the most effective way to unravel the meanings of new words. Syntax is needed to determine if the letters T-E-A-R mean a tear in the eye or a tear in fabric. You can’t phonologically recode those letters without a context. Then context enables you to check your understanding by reading further to see if your choice makes sense (Tunmer, 1990). Indeed, the learning of definitions is often hampered by the lack of use of a word’s part of speech to help understand what a word really means and how it is used (Fischer, 1990; Scott, 1991). It has been proposed that the greater metacognitive ability of children functioning in two languages is the result of their operating on words as objects and examining words and word parts in an analytical way (Taeschner, 1983). Word play, punning, joking, and other forms of word manipulation can make this happen. So, developing an environment in which word play and word awareness are integral is an appropriate goal for the classroom. Later in this chapter, we share ideas for word play in order to develop flexible ways of thinking about words.

**Word Play and Active Social Construction of Meaning**

Besides immersion in words, talk is critical to word play and word learning. Discussion in the classroom (Stahl & Vancil, 1986) and around the dinner table (Snow, 1991) is another correlate of incidental word learning. While this type of learning through exposure cannot guarantee the learning of specific words, it does develop a wide, flexible, and usable general vocabulary as well as the opportunity to learn from others. “Two heads are better than one” is especially true in vocabulary learning. There is rarely any word presented in a classroom context that does not elicit some meaning, association, or idea from some member of the class.

As in all learning situations, having the learners actively attempt to construct their own meanings is a hallmark of good instruction. Learning new words as we have new experiences is one of the most durable and
long-lasting ways to develop a rich vocabulary. Words like thread, needle, selvage, pattern, and dart are naturally learned in the context of learning to sew, just as hit, run, base, and fly take on special meanings for the baseball player. Answering and asking questions that invite students to evaluate different features of word meaning or different issues of a text is another way to become actively involved in discovering meaning (McKeown, Beck, & Worthy, 1993). For example, answering and explaining one's answer to the question “Would a recluse enjoy parties?” helps students focus on the important features of the word recluse. This discussion makes the process of figuring out meanings visible to learners.

Teachers can also make word meanings and relationships visible for students by having them actively construct word meaning. Chart games, collections, pen-and-paper games, manipulative category games, and art and drama not only physically display attributes of meanings but also provide memory organizers for later word use. For example, in coining the word inoculate—the first shot of coffee that gets you through the day—the student who drew the picture (see Figure 13.1) provided a pun with the attendant actual word meanings for memory.

**Word Play, Semantic Relatedness, Practice, and Rehearsal**

Many studies have shown the efficacy of putting word meaning into graphic form such as a map or web, a semantic feature chart, or advanced organizer (Johnson, Toms-Bronowski, & Pittelman, 1982). It is critical to note, however, that mere construction of such graphics without discussion...
is not effective (Stahl & Vancil, 1986). Other approaches that stress actively relating words to one another are clustering strategies that call for students to group words into related sets. These include brainstorming, grouping, and labeling (Marzano & Marzano, 1988), designing concept hierarchies, constructing definition maps related to concept hierarchies (Bannon, Fisher, Pozzi, & Wessell, 1990; Schwartz & Raphael, 1985), and mapping words according to their relation to story structure categories (Blachowicz, 1986). All these approaches involve student construction of maps, graphs, charts, webs, or clusters that represent the semantic relatedness of words under study to other words and concepts.

In word play, category games, such as Scattergories, are the “play” versions of these techniques. Word picture games such as Pictionary that use art to display meaning, acting-out games such as Charades, and synonym games such as Password and Taboo all emphasize semantic categories and relatedness and provide for practice and rehearsal. Besides the obvious active learning involved, word play also provides a vehicle for use and rehearsal, the creation of a personal record including visualization in graphics and drawing (Pressley & Woloshyn, 1995), and kinesthetic representations in drama (Duffelmeyer, 1980). Discussion, sharing, and use of the words are necessary components of active involvement, as is feedback and scaffolding on the part of the teacher.

In summary, we ground word play in the classroom in the research base that suggests it develops word awareness by engaging learners in learning and wanting to learn new words and developing their metacognitive ability. The evidence base suggests that, for effective word play in the classroom, teachers should (1) create a word-rich environment; (2) call on students to reflect metacognitively on words, word parts, and context; (3) encourage active engagement with discussion; and (4) emphasize relatedness in rehearsal and practice. We now present examples of word play that achieve these objectives.

**PRACTICE: MAKING IT HAPPEN**

**Creating a Word-Rich Environment**

**Materials**

A classroom full of materials is essential for growing good readers and for exposing them to a wide selection of vocabulary (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). Variety in levels of materials and topics is a must. Literacy materials should be chosen for motivational as well as instructional value. Besides books, newspapers, magazines, reference materials, and technological refer-
ences such as CD ROMs are necessary to meet the needs of all readers. A variety of excellent magazines are available for young children (e.g., *Lady Bug*, *Ranger Rick*, *National Geographic for Kids*) and upper elementary or adolescent students (e.g., *BMX*, *Skateboarder*, *Guitar*). Subscriptions to daily newspapers and weekly newsmagazines provide ongoing connections to current events and an introduction to adult reading. Magazines in content areas such as science (*Contact*) or history (*Cobblestone*) or regional magazines such as *Illinois History* or *Merlin’s Pen* provide current and motivating material related to the curriculum. Internet news groups and topical forums also require reading and give a “hot-off-the-press” feel to the reading curriculum. Classrooms should also have small-group and large-group sets of books, novels, anthologies, short stories, and magazines. Teachers often like to create sets of related books centering around one topic. For example, for a unit on the sea, a third-grade teacher collected books on several different levels. As part of the unit, she included a book about whale rescue, one about the life cycle of whales, and a third about whale habitats. The first book is about at grade level, the second a bit easier, and the third a bit more difficult. She used these as core books for the unit and then allowed students to seek out related materials. As the students engaged in small- and large-group discussions, the teacher listed thematic vocabulary that crossed all the books (e.g., *baleen*, *blowhole*, *spout*, *sound*).

Students with easy access to books read more and encounter more vocabulary than students who have to go down the hall at fixed periods to a school library or fetch books from high shelves. A comfortable place to read, a collection of good books, magazines, and newspapers; and the ability to develop a personal collection through book orders all increase the number of new words students encounter and practice on a daily basis.

**Games**

Games are useful for vocabulary practice and rehearsal. We suggest a variety of card, board, and other games to promote vocabulary development.

**Card Games**

Cards emphasize semantic relationships by working on the pairing principle. A pair is made when you match a word with a synonym, a definition, an antonym, a cloze sentence in which it makes sense, a picture symbolizing its meaning, or an English translation. Have students prepare a deck of at least 40 word-card pairs from words across their curriculum. For example, you may emphasize synonyms such as:
Cards are shuffled, and seven are dealt to each player. Each player can choose a card and discard one card in turn. Pairs may be placed on the table. The first player to pair all cards wins.

The same decks of word cards can be used to play more traditional games. For “Go-Fish,” all the cards are dealt, and players pick one card from the player on their left in turn. Pairs may be placed on the table. The first player to pair all cards wins. For “Old Teacher,” a variation of Old Maid, an extra card is prepared with a drawing of the teacher—or some generic teacher. This is played like fish. The person who is left with this card is the “Old Teacher.”

In all card games, students must read their pairs and can be challenged by another student if the group does not agree with the pair. The dictionary settles disputes. If the challenger is correct, she or he may take an extra turn. If the challenger is incorrect, the player gets an extra turn.

*Race-and-Chase Board Games.* Race-and-chase games require a poster board game board and moving pieces. Many teachers like to construct generic race-and-chase boards that can be used with many sets of cards. A 2” × 3” index card cut in half or thirds is an excellent size for word cards. Moving pieces can be commercially purchased at teacher stores or taken from garage sale games. In addition, dice or spinners are useful.

One of the easiest race-and-chase formats is “Synonym Match.” The stack of word cards is placed in the center of the board, and the synonym cards are arranged face up. Each student rolls a die and picks up a word card. If the student can correctly locate the synonym match, he or she can move the number of spaces on the die. The group and the dictionary again serve as the check. A harder version requires the students to use words in original sentences.

*Memory Games.* Like commercial memory games, word memory, or “Concentration,” involves finding matches and remembering cards. Play this game with about 25 cards—12 word cards, 12 match cards, and 1 wild card. All the cards are shuffled and placed face down. In each turn, a student turns up and reads two cards. If the cards are a match, the student takes the cards. If they are not a match, they are turned over and left in the same place. Students may use the wild card only if they can supply a suitable match orally. This can be checked at the end of the game by looking at the remaining card. The student with the most cards wins.

*Bingo.* This popular game can be played by any size group. Students each
have sets of word cards from which they construct a $5 \times 5$ (25-space) bingo card. They lay out their cards in any manner they choose, placing a “free” card in the space of their choice. The caller chooses definitions from the definition pile and reads them out. Students can place markers on the words that match. The first student to mark an entire row, column, or diagonal wins. Students check by reading the words and definitions. The cards are reshuffled, each student’s cards are rearranged, and the winner becomes the caller for the next game.

**Adapting Commercial Games.** Besides teacher-made games, many commercial games can be adapted for class use. For general word learning, Scrabble, Probe, Pictionary, Pictionary Junior, and Boggle are excellent. Teachers can add dictionary use as a component of play. Facts in Five and Scattergories are variations of the category game and can build general word learning. Outburst and Outburst Junior help develop networks by association. All are worthwhile for general vocabulary development.

**Crosswords and Other Puzzles.** Browsing any newsstand or bookstore will emphasize the popularity of word puzzles. Involvement in creating and doing puzzles can build a lifelong interest in words for students. Crossword puzzles are probably the most popular type of word puzzle. They are so familiar that we won’t go into detail about them here. One thing for teachers to note is that, although crosswords are familiar to most adults, the process is not familiar to most children. Take the time to work through a puzzle with your students until they get the general idea of how they are completed. Keeping blank grids in your classroom for creating puzzles is also a wonderful way to stimulate thinking about words and definitions.

**Codes.** Students love secret codes. Decoding a word, phrase, or sentence demands a substantial use of context and inference. Many books of coded and encrypted messages can be purchased at bookstores, supermarkets, and newsstands.

**Jumbles.** Jumbles, or anagrams, call for readers to unscramble words and letters to match a clue, sometimes in cartoon form. Most newspapers run a daily jumble that can provide good classroom material—as well as an incentive to browse the paper each day. This can be a good starter in middle school or high school homeroom periods.

**Computer Play and Exploration.** Many commercial programs are available for word play. For example, some create crosswords, semantic maps,
or word clusters, and there are electronic dictionaries and thesauruses. Students can also use the computer to create text or HyperCard personal word banks that can be easily alphabetized, coded, and clustered.

**Internet Resources**

There are a number of vocabulary websites that teachers and students can consult.

- [www.vocabulary.com](http://www.vocabulary.com). This website can be used by both teachers and students in middle school or above.
- [www.wordsmith.org/awad](http://www.wordsmith.org/awad). A.Word.A.Day (AWAD) has a theme of the week, such as words of German origin or words related to Halloween.
- [www.randomhouse.com/features/rhwebsters/game.html](http://www.randomhouse.com/features/rhwebsters/game.html). The game on this website is called “Beat the Dictionary,” and it is basically a version of online “Hangman.”
- [http://rhyme.lycos.com](http://rhyme.lycos.com). This website contains a rhyming dictionary and thesaurus program.
- [www.wordexplorations.com](http://www.wordexplorations.com). This site describes itself as an advanced English vocabulary site that will expand visitors’ vocabulary by focusing on Latin and Greek elements used in English.

**Word Play Emphasizing Metacognitive Manipulation of Words and Word Parts**

Students become interested in riddles and jokes in the early grades, and “pun-o-mania” hits in the middle grades. Riddle and joke books abound and quickly circulate in most classrooms. Creating riddles, jokes, and puns is one way to stimulate exploration of words and to build interest and flexibility in word learning.

**Word Riddles**

Mike Thaler (1988), a prolific author and conference speaker, has collected many ideas for riddle and joke making. One way to make word riddles that are questions with pun-like responses is to choose a subject and generate a list of related terms. For example, if your subject is pig, your list might contain ham, pork, pen, grunt, hog, and oink. You take the first letters off one of the words and make a list of words that begin with that letter pattern. For example, if you chose ham, you would make a list that began with am such as ambulance, amnesia, amphibian, and America. Then you put back
the missing letter and get hambulance, hannesia, hamphibian, and hamERICA. Then you would make up riddles for the words.

*Riddle:* How do you take a pig to a hospital?
*Answer:* In a hambulance!

*Riddle:* What do you call it when a pig loses its memory?
*Answer:* Hamnesia!

Taking students through five steps ensures that the process is transparent to the students: (1) shared experience, (2) think-aloud through the riddle, (3) group creation, (4) independent scaffolded creation, and (5) independent practice. Students can be further supported by having many books of jokes, riddles, and puns that give pleasurable practice as they become “riddlers.”

**Name Riddles**

Thaler (1988) also suggests Name Riddles. Look for names with the related word part. For example, remaining in the “pig mode,”

*Riddle:* What pig discovered the theory of relativity?
*Answer:* Albert Swinestein!

**Hink Pink**

Hink Pink asks students to come up with a pair of rhyming words to match a defining phrase. Each word in the pair is the same number of syllables. The person who creates the phrase clues the guesser with the term Hink Pink (two 1-syllable words), Hinky Pinky (two 2-syllable words), Hinkety Pinkety (two 3-syllable words), and so forth.

For example,

*Clue:* Hink Pink—an angry father. (Answer: mad dad)
*Clue:* Hinkety Pinkety—an evil clergyman. (Answer: sinister minister)

Hink pinks are fun, and often students can come up with more than one answer for a clue. Any meaningful answer is acceptable. The trick to understanding hink pinks is to learn to write them. Start with the answer, which is usually an adjective paired with a noun. These words must share the same number of syllables and rhyme, for example, *mad dad* from above. To write the question, brainstorm synonyms for each word (e.g., synonyms for *mad* = angry, irritated, upset; synonyms for *dad* = father, pop,
Encourage Active Engagement with Discussion

Many activities we have described call upon students to speak with others to clarify thinking. There are other playful ways in which talk can be encouraged in word play, such as playing guessing games and engaging in drama and drawing games.

20 Questions

This game can be adapted to help students think about words they are learning. The student who is “it” selects a word card from a prepared stack. Other students ask up to 20 yes/no questions. A turn ends with a “no.” If one correctly guesses the word, that player becomes “it” for the next round. If students do not guess the word, “it” gets another turn.

Categories

One of the most popular pencil-and-paper games is Categories. Draw a suitable size grid (e.g., 2 × 2 for young students; 5 × 5 for older students), and label each row with a category. Then choose a word whose number of letters matches the number of columns. For example, students in a ninth-grade study hall working on the Civil War constructed the grid shown in Figure 13.2. Players are given a designated time limit to fill in as many squares as they can, after which points are totaled. Taking each student’s card individually, players get 5 points for every category square they fill in which no other player has filled; 2 points for every category square filled in
that others have filled in, but with other words; and 1 point for every category square filled in where someone else has the same term. Inappropriate entries may be challenged and carry no point totals if they are not suitable.

**Word Challenge**

Word Challenge is another category game in which the categories are established to focus on particular word characteristics. For example, categories might include synonyms, antonyms, or related words (see Figure 13.3). The rules for Word Challenge are the same as for categories.

**Word Fluency**

Word Fluency is a technique that encourages students to use categorization to learn vocabulary (Readence & Searfoss, 1980). It is especially useful in a one-to-one or small-group situation. The task is to name as many words as possible in 1 minute. The teacher or student chosen to be monitor tallies the words as the student says them. If the student hesitates for 10 seconds or more, the tutor suggests looking around the room or to think about an activity they recently completed. After the student's initial effort, the tutor models naming words in categories, which is much easier and faster than choosing random words. The rules for scoring are (1) no repetitions, no number words, no sentences; (2) one point for each word; and (3) one point for each category of four words or more.

Students see this as a challenge and enjoy it. They want to try to beat their own score. Once a student is familiar with the activity, the tutor can provide categories from topics that have been studied recently: animals, science, or families, for example. The student must only name words that could be in these categories. Recently a tutor in our Reading Center wrote

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Autonym</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hard</td>
<td>soft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sensible</td>
<td>silly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>healthy</td>
<td>sick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neat</td>
<td>sloppy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>praise</td>
<td>scold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>friendly</td>
<td>spiteful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 13.3.** Word Challenge grid—alphabet antonyms (students have to choose antonyms that all begin with the same letter).
in her log about using Word Fluency with her student, Serge: “The word fluency was so much fun. Serge left it until last, but he had so much fun with it, I think he will choose it much earlier tomorrow.” She felt that this activity provided a good review of the vocabulary for Serge and, more importantly, demonstrated to him that he knew “lots of words.”

**Drama**

Drama can be used in three ways to promote word play: Synonym String, Situations, and Charades. First, use drama to build a set of related words, the Synonym String. Form the class into two teams and present each team with a starter word, such as *walk*. The group needs to come up with as many synonyms as they can and illustrate each dramatically. For example, they might *stroll, saunter, sashay, amble*, and so forth. A thesaurus can be helpful, or the teacher can present a list of words. Synonym Strings can lead to a discussion of denotative and shades of word meanings.

Second, students can use dramatization of words to create meaningful Situations that clarify word meaning (Duffelmeyer, 1980). Prepare a set of word cards, each containing a word, its meaning, an example of a situation, and a question. For example, the word might be *irate*; the situation might be to act out the situation of an irate father talking with a son who came in late for curfew; and the question might be, “When have you been irate?” Form groups of students and give one card to each group. The actors have time to discuss the word and plan a skit (limit to 5 minutes). They can use the situation on the card or plan their own. When presenting their skit, one member of the group writes the word on the board and pronounces it. The skit is acted out, and a cast member asks the audience the question and meaning of the word. At this point, the teacher can provide feedback, and all class members enter the word in a vocabulary file along with the meaning and some personal context.

Third, Charades can be played with phrases or single words. Words or phrases are written on word cards and placed in a stack. Students are divided into teams. One member of a team draws a card and attempts to act out each word or syllables of the word using a series of signals. A timekeeper from the other team keeps track of the time, and the team with the lowest time score after a full round wins. The related game Guesstures is a playful form of acting out words that older students love.

**Art**

Students love to play with words using art and drawing to create visual riddles. Not only does art provide a multisensory way to provide keys to word learning, but it also can provide a playful way for students with nonverbal
talents to relate to word learning. For example, for high school students studying word parts, a drawing activity was a natural way to show learning. If students are studying Latin forms (e.g., tri = three, ped = feet, bi = two, corn = horned, optis = eye), they can create and label their own original animals. For example, a bicornoptistriped (two-horned, three-footed animal with an eye) was drawn, as shown in Figure 13.4.

**Emphasize Relatedness in Rehearsal and Practice**

Most school curricula deal with common word categories, such as synonyms, antonyms, similes, and metaphors. But what about acronyms, portmanteau words, imported words, slang, collective words, and other creative categories of words?

Consider portmanteau words. When you pack a suitcase, or portmanteau, sometimes you scrunch things together to make room. For example, you might put your socks in your shoes. Portmanteau words are packed words formed by merging portions of one word with another. For example, smog is a common portmanteau word based on a combination of smoke and fog. English has a rich history of creating new words in this way, a tendency readily picked up by Madison Avenue, journalists, and comic book writers. Advertising has given us the motel (motor + hotel), cartoons zap (zip + slap), science the beefalo (beef + buffalo), and political journalism insinuendo (insinuation + innuendo) (McKenna, 1978). Include these in your investigation of words to help build broad categories of vocabulary. Teachers often have students build bulletin board lists or word walls of these fascinating types of words, such as the following categories:

![Figure 13.4. A bicornoptistriped triped.](image)
• Acronym: a word formed from the initial letters of other words (e.g., scuba = self-contained underwater breathing apparatus).
• Anagram: a word or phrase formed by scrambling the letters of a word (e.g., lake/kale).
• Borrowed words: words used in English from other countries (e.g., café, lariat, pretzel).
• Collective words: words that label a group, typically of animals (e.g., a gaggle of geese, a pride of lions).
• Malapropism: use of an incorrect word for a similar sounding one (e.g., My Gramma has very close veins).
• Onomatopoeia: a word whose sound relates to its meaning (e.g., buzz, gulp).
• Oxymoron: a phrase composed of words that seem contradictory (e.g., plastic silverware).
• Palindrome: words or phrases that read the same forward or backward (e.g., mom, dad, Able was I ere I saw Elba).
• Spoonerism: an unintentional transposition of sounds (e.g., Please pass the salt and shecker papers).

Students also like to make collections of personal interest words, such as “All the Words About . . . ” books. In these books, students collect words related to a topic, a hobby, a person of interest, and so forth, and soon the class library has such collections as “All the Words About Baseball,” “All the Words About Ferrets,” and “All the Words About Wesley Snipes.” Students are fascinated by other students’ collections, and these books, many illustrated or collaged, circulate widely.

A FINAL WORD

In this chapter, we have presented a research base for word play in the classroom. This grounding supports four goals for classroom word play: (1) create a word-rich environment; (2) call on students to reflect metacognitively on words, word parts, and context; (3) encourage active engagement with discussion; and (4) emphasize relatedness in rehearsal and practice. There is convincing evidence that classroom practice reflecting these principles will encourage incidental word learning as well as developing word awareness and interest in students. In addition, our own experience working with struggling readers is that, almost universally, they have not participated in word games either at home or at school. When we invited them to do so, they often become animated and motivated. They look forward to those parts of our sessions together and frequently take games home to play with parents and siblings. We have found that parents who
are anxious to improve their child’s literacy rarely think of word games as something that can be done at home. However, when they try them and see the joy that they can bring to a previously reluctant learner, they ask for more. Consequently, we view games and word play as valuable commodities in the curriculum and a way to encourage links between home and school. They are vehicles for putting the “fun” back in one of the most fundamental aspects of learning during the school years—vocabulary development.

REFERENCES


