

Serious Playfulness: Setting the Tone for Teaching Language and Grammar

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As faculty and student representatives of an English education program, we want to set the record straight: we are convinced that grammar and language study are still vital to the secondary English curriculum. And we believe that new and experienced teachers of English/language arts need to understand how language works in order to make good decisions about which aspects of it to teach. But we aren't deceiving ourselves. We know that language study lacks the appeal of its subject area counterparts: literature, composition, speaking/listening, and media. We know that "fascination with the structures of grammar" is

not an answer that many preservice teachers would give when asked, "What drew you to English teaching as a career choice?" And yet, we have found that all of our reasons for choosing to teach English, including our love of literature, our enthusiasm for writing, even our commitment to making a difference in kids' lives, share one common feature: a reliance on language. Literature, composition, speaking/listening, and media study are enhanced when we consider each as an extension of language study.

Students in our English education program learn to think of language as the heart of the subject area in the required course, Applied Linguistics for Teachers of English. At the beginning of the course, many are unsure about what "linguistics" means. During the course, though, we learn together how our language works. We become increasingly intrigued with its flexibility, generative properties, and surprises. We grow eager to translate our newly-acquired knowledge into lessons that will speak to middle and high school students. And we develop a deep and lasting appreciation—and even an enthusiasm—for teaching and learning language and grammar.

Serious Study

In order to understand how language works as a vehicle for thought and communication, we study linguistics, including English grammar, from three perspectives. First we examine language as a cognitive and mental phenomenon. Our initial concentration on psycholinguistics leans heavily on careful consideration of Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct*. Pinker, a brilliant and irreverent neuroscientist, is a colleague of reknowned linguist Noam Chomsky. Pinker helps us grasp how the brain takes advantage of a mental grammar to engage in language production and reception. He shows us how the morphemes and listemes of our language contribute to our ability to make meaning with clusters of words. He teaches us that even phonemes have a predictable syntax. Pinker reminds us of the potential for confusion during conversations in which the listener hears what we actually say, instead of what we intend to say. He insists that we learn to separate "language" from "intelligence," and thus prepares us to consider personal, social, and political assumptions and misconceptions about language use.

From our focus on language within the brain and mind, we move into a consideration of language as a social construct. At this point, we are introduced to sociolinguistics by Walt Wolfram's clear and intriguing, "Linguistic and Sociolinguistic Requisites for Teaching Language." With Wolfram as our frame of reference, we develop a foundation for moving into consideration of the social aspects of language use. We discuss topics as diverse as an examination of the systematic features of African American (or black) English vernacular and the features of power displayed in classroom discourse. During this portion of the course, we wrestle with touchy issues of prestige and power in language. We focus on practical questions about what teachers need to know and do in order to address students' use of nonstandard dialects as different, not deficient. (And we examine the reasons that the prestige or power dialect is called "standard," even though all dialects are rule-governed, and thus have their own standardization.) We rely on local teachers as experts who bring us their stories about teaching language in ways that are sensitive to students' personal and social identities. We pose responses to essays like "Shame on Whom," in which Gary Young discusses how he had to abandon his own prejudices as a speaker of Southwestern English before he could teach about language. We study approaches like the one recommended in "Acknowledging the Language of African American Students: Instructional Strategies," in which Sharroky Hollie describes how African American Language (AAL) is used as a curricular bridge to the acquisition of school literacy. Many of us reflect on our own concerns when we discuss Sara Dalmas Jonsberg's "What's a (White) Teacher to Do about Black English?" The shift from psycholinguistics to sociolinguistics prepares us for careful and detailed consideration of the teaching and learning of language that can occur in the classroom setting.

With a background for understanding language from cognitive and social perspectives in place, we are able to end the semester with attention to applied linguistics. We experiment with teaching grammar and usage, paying particular attention to typical school grammar topics ranging from sentence fragments, to indefinite pronouns, to parallelism. We rely on the guidance of widely-recognized grammar authority Constance Weaver, through her *Teaching Grammar in Context*. We do homework, drawing on grammar and composition handbooks, in order to refresh our knowledge of the parts of speech, parts

of sentences, and the vocabulary of sentence construction. We conduct panel discussions on common grammar and usage problems, many of which we identify when we read papers written by local middle and high school students. We participate in individual and small group presentations of student-generated lesson plans that address those common problems. We engage in spirited conversations about how to incorporate grammar instruction into the teaching of all the language arts.

Setting the Tone

Despite this rigorous itinerary, we have a terrific time studying language. How? The answer lies in the tone we establish for language study. That tone is set when we practice what we profess: we play with language. A lot. Each day, a prospective teacher leads the class in a five-minute "Word Play *du Jour*." We take those five minutes to be playful for two very serious reasons. First, we believe that when students are entertained by language study, they are more likely to find the serious aspects of grammar study palatable. Those who enjoy creating *oronyms* (for instance, when a student read, "President Bush attends peace talk" quickly, it sounded like "President Bush a tense pea stalk") are likely to pay attention to their use of diction when they make speeches and even when they write essays. Second, we believe that when we develop mental habits through which we attend carefully to the oral and written language that occurs all around us, we will find language curiosities everywhere. For example, when we were laughing about the malapropisms that Pinker calls "Mondegreens" (183), one student confessed that she'd always thought the line sung by Elton John, "Hold me closer, tiny dancer" was, "Hold me closer, Tony Danza." We are convinced that our teacherly enthusiasm for language itself will be contagious among our middle and high school students.

Playful Practice

The teaching and learning of language and grammar can be tedious, serious, and daunting. But we are convinced that it does not have to be that way. If you would like to test our hypothesis that language study can be serious play, add any of the following five-minute Word Play *du Jour* activities to your routine as class starters. We have divided them into three categories: "Weird Words and Funny Phrases," "Silly

Sentences and Then Some,” and “The Whole Thing” for easy reference, and we have included author attributions. We have tested each of them for you, and have found them safe and effective.

Weird Words and Funny Phrases

Hidden Meanings

Dana Casserleigh

Take the first five to ten minutes of class and exercise your students’ thinking skills with hidden meanings brain teasers. The examples I like to use come from the *Sixth Grade Brain Teasers* by Teacher Created Materials. These include puzzles that ask students to give an alternative meaning to word groups like three of my favorites that I have listed below:

- a. ME QUIT! (answer: “Quit following me!”)
- b. Knee
Light (answer: neon light)
- c. B
BA
BACK (answer: quarter back, half back, and full back).

Teachers might establish a routine for having students use the first few minutes of class to solve the day’s brain teaser. It helps focus the students’ attention to the subject of the class—words! The teacher might also challenge the students to find or create teasers for their classmates to solve. This simple activity provides students an opportunity to play with language, to boost their confidence for taking risks with creative ideas, and ultimately to feel trusting and willing to learn in the classroom.

Give Us a Little Bit More: Oxymorons

Jennifer Pliske

I like using five-minute word plays as a way to encourage students to experiment with some of the curiosities of our language. Richard Lederer’s *Crazy English: The Ultimate Joy Ride through Our Language* and *Anguished English: An Anthology of Accidental Assaults Upon Our Language* are two books that I recommend as terrific sources that allow a teacher to bring attention to the odd and funny ways we sometimes use English.

Lederer helps students consider, for example, why we say that “teachers taught,” but we would never say that “preachers praught.” After exploring

language oddities in general during one day’s word play, I shift the focus to a specific kind of odd language use: the incongruity of oxymorons. First have them examine a short list of oxymorons; a recent list generated in a class included these choices: bitter-sweet, modern history, pretty ugly, same difference, and giant shrimp. Next, ask students to discuss what makes a phrase an oxymoron and write a definition in their notes. Finally, I ask the class to generate its own list of oxymorons. This activity helps students see and appreciate some of the playful abnormalities of the English language. For more help with a word play on oxymorons, I suggest this useful Web site: <http://www.oxymorons.com/oxymorons.html>.

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Palindromes

Joel Marc

A palindrome is a word or number that reads the same from either end: “mom” and “dad” are simple, memorable examples. The names Bob, Eve, and Otto are all palindromes, too, as is the name of the 1980s pop group, ABBA. The year 2002 is also a palindrome. I have found that students enjoy playing with palindromes once they know to look for them. Using <http://www.askoxford.com/wordgames/wordchallenges/palindromes> as a resource, I recently stumped students by asking them to take five minutes to try to figure out which palindromes these dozen clues represented. (I have included the answers in parentheses.)

Part of the body	(eye)
Midday	(noon)
A young dog	(pup)
Flat	(level)
A word for addressing a lady	(madam)

A kind of canoe	(kayak)
A system for detecting aircraft, ships, etc.	(radar)
An action	(deed)
Pieces of music for one person	(solos)
Grass that grows on the seashore	(minim)
A doctrine	(tenet)
Restorer	(reviver)

Letters Add Up!

Alexandria McCoy

The objective of this word play is to have students play with the individual letters that make up words. Given a group of letters, the mere subtraction of a consonant or the addition of a vowel can make the difference between being able to spell 300 words and being able to spell 1,200 words! The word play is easy: give students a row of letters (I have used fourteen randomly chosen letters, combining vowels and consonants in no particular proportion). Have students write as many words in the English language that they can generate, using only those letters. After they have created their list of words, have them work in small groups to compare and contrast lists, and perhaps to make a master list. Next, go to the <http://www.wordplays.com> Web site. There, ask a student volunteer to type in the same row of letters; the Web site will generate its own list of words using those letters. Later, they might work again in small groups to engage in a friendly competition: each group can type in a random set of letters (specify the number); the group that generates the most words “wins,” but all students will benefit as they consider the generative nature of our alphabetic system.

Alphabet Appetizer

Shauna Trommelen

For this alphabet and phoneme-focused word play, first write all of the letters of the alphabet on the board so that it is clearly visible when the students arrive. When they enter the classroom, merely ask students to select any six letters and write words that sound like English, but that they have never heard before, then create definitions for those words (or include them in a poem reminiscent of Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky”). When they finish, have volunteers share examples, then lead a discussion about why their “new words” sound like English, even though they are not part of our language, and, im-

portantly, why they did *not* create words with a collection of letters such as “gplmhlq.” This word play makes students aware of how phonemes contribute to language understanding. It is particularly appropriate for middle school students, and although it can prove frustrating for students who are not native speakers of English, it may help them recognize that they do know the sounds of English, even when they cannot yet attach meanings to word sounds.

Jumpin’ Jargon!

Clair Pople

This activity takes a look at jargon and how it is acquired. Research the vocabulary associated with a popular sport. I chose figure skating. Record definitions of many words used in special ways within that sport. (I wrote the definitions for jumps and maneuvers that would be considered skating jargon.) Next, write only the words on individual index cards (one for each member of the class) and pass them out to the class. Without providing the actual definitions, ask the students to make up a definition for the word on the index card that they have in front of them. (What might *you* write if asked to define “mohawk” or “double toe loop” accurately?) Have students take turns reading their definitions. Next, put the actual sport-related definitions on a transparency, so that students can compare their definitions with the authentic ones. I recommend this activity as a way to begin a discussion on how it feels to not understand words, especially technical vocabulary or jargon. This might be especially helpful for students whose classmates include non-native speakers of English. It also opens a conversation about the ways in which language is always changing to meet current needs—and that jobs, interests, and hobbies are filled with (often-changing) jargon.

A British Heritage

Laura Mire

This word play illustrates to students that the English language not only differs regionally but also across countries where it is the primary language. Begin this word play by passing out an index card to each student; each card should have a typically British word printed on it. Some possibilities that I have collected through conversation with my British mother include these: crisps (potato chips), chemist (drug store), broly (umbrella), dust man (garbage man), flat (apartment), gobsmacked

(amazed), and loo (toilet). Give the students a few minutes to try to write a definition for their word. Some students will know the definition of their word or be able to deduce its meaning. Collect the index cards and read the student's definition, followed by the actual meaning. Provide each student with a list of the paired British and American terms. Then open the floor to any further questions about the British language or stories students may want to share about times they have used regional or unusual terms or phrases that others didn't understand. To find terms to use in this activity or answers to students' questions, ask a British friend/relative (as I did) or try searching the Web. I suspect that this word play could add a spark of levity to the study of British literature.

Proud to Get an F: Recognizing Reading Miscues

Natalie Jenkins

This word play tests students' brains in a unique way. Ask students to read the following, printed just as it appears below, then count the Fs they find in it:

Finished Files Are The Results
Of Years Of Scientific Study
Combined With The
Experience Of Years.

Most likely, the students will count the number of Fs as three, but there are actually six Fs in the paragraph. Three Fs in the paragraph are often missed because the brain sometimes "overlooks" function words such as *of* and *the*.

Reading miscues occur when students turn these function words into other words. *The* might become *these*, and *a* might become *the*, for example. It is interesting (and important) for teachers to note that reading miscues like these seldom cause a problem for the reader, since they don't significantly change meaning. When reading comprehension is not affected, these miscues do not need to be treated as mistakes.

Silly Sentences, and Then Some

Tongue Twisters

Karyn Gano

Most people remember spending at least one afternoon as a child sitting around with friends reciting

She sells seashells by the seashore as fast as they possibly could without messing up. These fun childhood games are also educationally beneficial and may be used by speakers of English as a second language to improve their accent, by speech therapists to help students with speech difficulties, and by young students to help with their ability to enunciate.

Tongue twisters, using the concept of combining similar sounds, the effects of alliteration, and phrases designed specifically for accidental mistakes of diction, can easily be incorporated into the curriculum of the classroom. A vowel or consonant is repeated over and over again in the phrase to help students practice the sound. For example, with *She sells seashells by the seashore*, use the repetition of the S to practice the articulation.

To use a tongue twister, write the phrase so that everyone can see it. Simple starters are "great Greek grapes" and "freshly-fried flying fish." Say the twister yourself three times, very quickly, then ask volunteers to repeat it three times, too. The students will thoroughly enjoy this vocal time, especially if they or you make a mistake! This is a great activity that can easily be adopted to use with many different students at many different levels of English language competency. A more complicated example is this twist on an old favorite: *She sells seashells by the seashore. The shells she sells are surely seashells. So if she sells shells on the seashore, I'm sure she sells seashore shells.* A Web site that provides a long list of tongue twisters, both simple and elaborate, is found at <http://www.fun-with-words.com> (a site that has teamed up with Amazon.com).

Spoonerisms

Isaiah Harper

Using <http://www.fun-with-words.com>, a teacher can produce a list of "Spoonerisms" to give students as an example of a particular kind of inaccuracy in language usage. (A "Spoonerism" is a phonetic transposition where the sounds, more than the letters themselves, are switched.) Then ask students to spend five minutes generating their own lists, perhaps playing with the names of their school and classmates as a starting place. Some of my favorite Spoonerisms are lighting a fire / fighting a liar; You missed my history lecture / You hissed my mystery lecture; battle ships and cruisers / cattle ships and bruisers; Is the Dean busy? / Is the bean dizzy?; eye ball / bye all.

Vocal Puzzle

Kimmy Carter

I went to the Web site <http://www.justriddlesandmore.com/vocalans.html> and found Vocal Puzzles, which easily can be incorporated into the classroom for lively word play. With Vocal Puzzles, readers see words and read them quickly to try to determine which more familiar phrase they sound like. I have students practice with me as I read, slowly at first, these words: THESE HOUND DOVE MOO SICK, then read the words quickly until someone in the class hears “The Sound of Music.” This is a fun activity because it is amazing to see how the roles of reader and listener differ: the reader finds it hard to figure out what they are saying, while the listener laughs, knowing exactly what the phrase means. When we look at the random words placed together, they don’t make sense, yet, all the words combined make perfect sense when heard.

Just What Do You Mean by That?

Michael Pierce

This word play is ideal for helping native speakers of English understand how difficult our language can be for our friends who are native speakers of other languages. Give students the “headlines” below, and ask them to provide at least two different interpretations for each. Then, ask volunteers to read and explain their responses. The session produces laughter about our language and opens up conversations about how syntax and diction contribute to, and often obstruct, clear communication.

Headlines that I have used when teaching ESL teachers and their non-native speaking students:

- Astronaut Takes Blame for Gas in Spacecraft!
- Safety Experts Say School Bus Passenger Should be Belted
- Two Sisters Reunite After 18 Years in Checkout Lane
- Squad Helps Dog Bite Victim
- Red Tape Holds Up New Bridge
- Enraged Cow Injures Farmer with an Ax

With this set as an example, teachers can encourage students to scour the headlines of their local paper and find—or create—their own examples to bring to the class for more word play.

The Whole Thing

Apples and Bananas

Sarah Spence

Our students love to hate what we love. Therefore, we have to find ways to show them that language can be fun. If we encourage students to play with language, we can show them how powerful it can be. Then they will be learning a valuable lesson without even knowing it.

One way we can get kids playing with language, phonemes, and vowel sounds is to teach them the old camp song, “Eight Apples and Bananas.” This song takes the simple phrase, “I want to eat eight apples and bananas,” and, in succession, replaces all the vowel sounds, using one of the five vowels throughout the song, then singing the song five times. For example, when it is time to substitute “i” for all of the existing vowels, students will sing, “I wint ti ite ight ipllis ind bininis.” When it is time to substitute “e” for each of the existing vowels, the result, “E went te ete eeght epples end benenes,” is equally funny and ridiculous. (If you don’t know the tune, merely use a tune that you and your students are familiar with—the tune for “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad” works well, for example.)

This is a terrific lesson to use as a “dive-in” activity for a study of consonant sounds, phonemes, and other parts of word structure. This activity is meant to be fun . . . so have a good time with it.

Collaborative Round-Robin Creative Writing

Sarah Curtis

This activity is guaranteed to get students thinking and writing in fun, creative ways. First, the teacher needs to choose the genre—poetry or fiction. For poetry, students will need to sit in a circle and take out a sheet of paper. The teacher may give a topic for the poems they are about to compose (e.g., celebrities). Each student will choose a celebrity and write the title and first line of their poem. Students will then pass their paper to the classmate on their right, and that student will write the second line. The poem continues to be passed until it returns to its original owner as a full-length poem. To create serious poems, students will pass the paper as it is so the next person can see the whole piece. For silly poems, students will fold back the previous response before they pass it on so that only one line is seen at a time.

For creating fictional stories, students should be placed into small groups. One group member will take out a sheet of paper and write the first line of the story, or the teacher can provide one such as “One fall afternoon, I . . .” Students will write a line and pass the paper around the circle and create either one long, grammatically correct sentence (preferable for older students) or a complete story (for younger students). These ideas were tested in my university level creative writing class, and they proved popular even among these student writers, who produced many unexpectedly interesting results.

“Out of the Mouths of Babes . . .”

Erin Graham

This word play activity is designed to help high school students think about the linguistics and grammar system of a child, and help them see how a child thinks and puts those thoughts into speech. Further, it will motivate students to play around with point of view and foster creativity in their own writing.

Here is how it works: Read a portion of a children’s book to your students. I like any of the Junie B. Jones trade books by Barbara Parks, but most any children’s book that is written from a child’s point of view will work well. Read the story as if you were a child; ask students to listen for inflections in your voice and the different pauses between words, phrases, and sentences. (You might ask a few of the students to alternate as oral readers as well, depending on time.) Discuss with your students what they heard and how the thoughts and words of a child narrator are different from those of an adult. Generate a list of differences on the board or overhead. Then ask students to write the next chapter of the story, using the same narrative voice and point of view. Read a few volunteers’ work to the class. Again, discuss what it was that the students inserted into their writing that made it different from what they would have written from their own adolescent point of view.

Exploring and Expanding Definitions

Sarah Tripp

Ask students to look up literal/dictionary definitions for a short list of words that include abstract terms such as *real*, *enlist*, *dream*, *hope*, *dance*, *forgive*, *laugh*, *disappoint*, and *win* and record their definitions on paper. Next, ask them to expand those de-

finitions far beyond the dictionary, using the following literary examples as models:

To enlist. To slam the door impulsively on the past, to shed everything down to my last bit of clothing, to break the pattern of my life—that complex design I have been weaving since birth with all its dark threads, its unexplainable symbols set against a conventional background of domestic white and schoolboy blue, all those tangled strands which required the dexterity of a virtuoso to keep flowing—I yearned to take giant military shears to it, snap! bitten off in an instant, and nothing left in my hands but spools of khaki which could weave only a plain, flat, khaki design, however twisted they might be.

—from *A Separate Peace*
by John Knowles

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick out handle?”

“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It is a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit?

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”

—from *The Velveteen Rabbit*
by Margery Williams

Translate This!

Craig Bultman

Professor Lawless, of St. Petersburg (FL) Junior College, introduced the following word play idea to a class of creative writing students. His idea is useful not only for helping students learn to take risks as writers, but also to help them recognize the importance of syntax for a reader who is trying to understand a writer’s words. The activity requires that the teacher give students a short work of literature written in a language that is unfamiliar to them. Students are to try their best to “translate” the poem, using syntax clues and cognates (words that look similar to English words). They should not spend too much time trying to perfect their translations, and it is possible that, despite their efforts, they will come up with nonsensical strings of unrelated words instead of a work of literature. After five minutes, display the English translation and begin a discussion of

which words and which syntactic elements in the original version were most helpful as clues when they tried to write translations. Below is a French poem and an English translation that I recently used successfully for this activity; students enjoy comparing the translations they create after they work through the poem:

De sentir toute cette beaute dispersee dans les
musees vient le desespoir de ne pouvoir Ja garder
en soi. Au-dehors, on apercoit les grandes arbres
d'un jardin alors que vole un oiseau des payes tem-
peres. Parfois, on entend gronder l'orage, les
tableaux lentement s'assombrissent. Pour les rues,
les gens se hatent devant de vasates monuments
qui les opressent. Le pluie foute des verrieres,
l'ouragan brise des branches, cependant que le
portrait d'une femme nue sourit dans son cadre
d'or noir, s'esclaire d'une luminere indecise.

—Jean Follain

In English:

From being aware of all this beauty scattered in museums comes the despair of not being able to hold onto it. Outside, one sees the tall trees of a garden as a bird of temperate regions takes flight. Sometimes, one hears the storm rumble, the paintings slowly darken. It's a diversion for the old guards, they comment on the sky. In the streets, people hurry before vast monuments that oppress them. The rain is whipping the glass, the hurricane is breaking branches, while the portrait of a naked woman smiles in its gilded black frame, grows bright with an uncertain light.

Serious Playfulness

We do not suggest that these playful activities should replace more structured language and grammar study, lessons that can fine-tune students' awareness of how they might manipulate language to express ideas in a polite, powerful, persuasive, pontificating, pretentious, pouting, or pompous way. Our claim is merely that Word Play *du Jour* activities can set the tone for meaningful and engaging lessons about language. They can bring attention to words, phrases, sentences, and structures. They can generate wonder, awe, and enthusiasm for the miracle and power of human language. They can reinforce the truth of Pinker's words: "Language is so tightly woven into

human experience that it is scarcely possible to imagine life without it" (3). We hope that you will invite your middle and high school students, and the prospective and practicing teachers with whom you work, to collect examples of language play and bring them to the attention of students, where they can be Word Play *du Jour* teachers, too. And please let us know what you find by e-mailing us at pcarroll@garnet.fsu.edu.

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