



5

Flexing Thinking with Laughter

Jokes, Riddles, and Other Wordplay Activities

In the last two chapters we focused on children's ability to think about words' sounds and meanings simultaneously, and we learned how to help word callers shift from a sound-only focus to a more meaning-focused approach to print. Sometimes our students need extra help thinking flexibly about words' meanings for optimal comprehension. Because words often have multiple meanings, the ability to call up the *right* meaning for a particular context affects understanding. (Consider, for example, the word *jam*, which can appear next to *traffic* or next to *strawberry*, resulting in very different interpretations of *jam's* meaning.) In other instances authors (and speakers) use multiple meanings to convey humorous messages, which will be missed if students can't consider the multiple meanings in texts.

Remember this?

What's black and white and red all over?

A newspaper!

Or this:

A duck goes to the pharmacy counter to buy some lip balm.

"How would you like to pay for this?" asks the pharmacist.

"Oh, just put it on my bill," the duck replied.

Or this:

What did the dinosaur say when he ate a clown?

"That tasted funny!"

Chances are, if you work with elementary school children, you have heard classics like these over and over. As much as we may groan at their comball humor, on some level we are glad they keep bubbling up generation after generation. And it turns out, the endurance of riddles is no accident, as they perform a valuable function in

children's development—perhaps especially for those children who need to become more flexible in their thinking about print. Here's how.

Jokes and riddles often include ambiguous words, such as homonyms and homophones, to achieve their humorous result (see Figure 5-1 for more examples of riddles that rely on verbal ambiguity). Remember, homonyms are words with the same spelling and pronunciation but with different meanings. The word *bill* in the duck joke, for example, is a homonym. Homophones, on the other hand, are words with the same pronunciation but different spellings and meanings, such as *red* and *read* in the famous riddle about the newspaper.

FIGURE 5-1

Examples of Riddles That Rely on Verbal Ambiguity

- Q:** Why was the baby ant confused?
A: Because all of his uncles were aunts
- Q:** How much is a skunk worth?
A: One scent
- Q:** What building has the most stories?
A: The library
- Q:** Why wasn't the moon so smart?
A: Because the sun is brighter
- Q:** What nails do carpenters hate to hit?
A: Fingernails
- Q:** Why is six afraid of seven?
A: Because seven eight nine.
- Q:** What did the dinosaur say when he ate a clown?
A: That tasted funny.
- Q:** What did one ocean say to the other?
A: Nothing, they just waved.

(These riddles were gathered from <http://kids.niehs.nih.gov/jokes.htm#jokes>, <http://tiki.oneworld.net/fun/jokes/jokes.html>, www.azkidsnet.com/riddles.htm, and www.squiglyplayhouse.com/JokesAndRiddles/index.html on February 23, 2009.)

The misperceptions that arise from the dual meanings of homonyms and homophones are what we find humorous. Even in everyday conversation, children sometimes misperceive ambiguous words' meanings. I remember one afternoon when I picked my daughter up at school and she said, "Mom, Ms. Mary was fired today. I bet that hurt!" Clearly, Jessie had interpreted *fired* to mean something to do with an actual flame rather than termination of Mary's employment. In this instance, Jessie did not know the alternate meaning of the homonym, *fire*. This example illustrates an important point about children's understanding of ambiguous words: to grasp the verbal ambiguity that often results from homonyms and homophones, children must have knowledge of the two, often incompatible, meanings of these words. However, even if children know both meanings, to understand the humor in jokes and riddles that rely on verbal ambiguity, children also must be able to consider simultaneously both of the meanings associated with ambiguous words. That is, they must hold two ideas in mind at once.



INSIGHT FROM CHILDREN'S THINKING

As we learned in Chapter 2, students who lack cognitive flexibility have difficulty thinking about two ideas at once, especially when the ideas are very different from one another, as is often the case with homonyms' and homophones' multiple meanings. Word callers' tendency to think about one idea at a time means that they are less likely than skilled comprehenders to note multiple meanings for words or to understand riddles that rely on verbal ambiguity (Yuill and Oakhill 1991; Yuill 1996). Thus, when word callers encounter ambiguous words in text and make inappropriate initial interpretations of those words, they are less likely than their peers with better comprehension to notice alternative meanings that would better fit the text's context and preserve comprehension (van der Schoot et al. 2009).

The Research Base

In fact, lack of awareness of multiple possible meanings of words is related to poor comprehension in children, adolescents, and adults (Gernsbacher and Robertson 1995; Yuill 1996, 2007; Zipke 2007). However, children's comprehension improves when we teach them how to recognize and consider multiple meanings of ambiguous words and sentences (Yuill 1996, 2007; Zipke 2008; Zipke, Ehri, and Cairns 2009).

Working with school children in Brighton, a town on the southern coast of England, Nicola Yuill (1996, 2007; also see Yuill et al. 2008 for a review) was one of the first researchers to explore the use of ambiguous words to improve word callers' awareness of texts' multiple meanings. She knew that metalinguistic awareness—children's ability to reflect on language—was related to reading

comprehension (see Nagy 2007 for more on metalinguistic awareness); and she reasoned that because children typically have much experience with jokes and riddles, these language forms might provide a useful way to help children become more aware of words' multiple meanings, with positive effects on reading comprehension. So, she engaged children who fit the word caller profile in several activities, such as

- defining and generating words with multiple meanings
- explaining multiple meanings in ambiguous sentences (e.g., *The keys were found by the dog*. This sentence could mean that the keys were next to the dog, or it could mean that the dog found the keys.)
- explaining ambiguity in compound words (e.g., *butterfly* refers to a type of insect, but it could also refer to a winged food item)
- explaining jokes and riddles that rely on verbal ambiguity (e.g., the riddles with which I opened the chapter).

Yuill (1996) found that seven- to eight-year-old word callers who experienced these activities in 30-minute sessions, once per week, for seven weeks showed improved comprehension, such that their comprehension scores were similar to that of good comprehenders in the study. In a second, similar study, Yuill (2007) had pairs of children discuss homonyms and homophones, ambiguous sentences, and riddles based on verbal ambiguity, which were presented on a computer. As was found in the initial study, these activities also improved children's reading comprehension.

While Nicola Yuill's research was conducted with elementary children in the U.K., Marcy Zipke and her colleagues have extended this work to U.S. elementary school children (Zipke 2008; Zipke, Ehri, and Cairns 2009). Zipke's intervention involved activities that were similar to those used by Nicola Yuill (1996, 2007), except that Zipke added an additional activity, which involved teaching children to identify ambiguous words in popular children's books that provide opportunities to discuss multiple meanings. Perhaps most well known for its play with word meanings, the *Amelia Bedelia* children's book series, by Peggy Parish and Herman Parish, centers around the humorous exploits of Amelia Bedelia, a maid who makes numerous mistakes because she misinterprets common word usages. For example, in the first book in the series, when Amelia Bedelia was asked by her employers to "draw the drapes," she drew a picture of the drapes rather than opening them, much to her employers' surprise (Parish 1963). Mistakes such as this one offer the opportunity to discuss multiple meanings for homonyms like *draw*, and Zipke (2008; Zipke, Ehri, and Cairns 2009) used these texts in her intervention. (See Figure 5-2 for a list of books that promote discussion of multiple meanings, including *Amelia Bedelia* books and other books that use wordplay.) Children were taught to identify multiple meanings in homonyms and homophones, ambiguous sentences, riddles, and texts, resulting in significant improvement in children's reading comprehension.

FIGURE 5-2

Books That Support Discussion of Multiple Text Meanings	
Barretta, Gene. 2007. <i>Dear Deer</i> . New York: Henry Holt.	Parish, Herman. 1995. <i>Good Driving, Amelia Bedelia</i> . New York: HarperCollins
Cleary, Brian. 2007. <i>How Much Can a Bare Bear Bear? What Are Homonyms and Homophones?</i> Minneapolis: First Avenue Editions.	Parish, Herman. 1997. <i>Bravo, Amelia Bedelia</i> . New York: HarperCollins.
Fox, Mem. 1984. <i>Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge</i> . La Jolla, CA: Kane/Miller.	Parish, Herman. 1999. <i>Amelia Bedelia 4 Mayor</i> . New York: HarperCollins.
Frasier, Debra. 2000. <i>Miss Alaineus: A Vocabulary Disaster</i> . New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.	Parish, Herman. 2002. <i>Calling Doctor Amelia Bedelia</i> . New York: HarperCollins.
Gwynne, Fred. 1970. <i>The King Who Rained (Stories to Go!)</i> . New York: Aladdin.	Parish, Herman. 2003. <i>Amelia Bedelia, Bookworm</i> . New York: HarperCollins.
Gwynne, Fred. 1976. <i>A Chocolate Moose for Dinner (Stories to Go!)</i> . New York: Aladdin.	Parish, Herman. 2003. <i>Amelia Bedelia and the Christmas List</i> . New York: HarperCollins.
Gwynne, Fred. 1988. <i>A Little Pigeon Toad</i> . New York: Aladdin.	Parish, Herman. 2004. <i>Happy Haunting, Amelia Bedelia</i> . New York: HarperCollins.
Parish, Peggy. 1963. <i>Amelia Bedelia</i> . New York: HarperCollins.	Parish, Herman. 2004. <i>Amelia Bedelia Goes Back to School</i> . New York: HarperCollins.
Parish, Peggy. 1964. <i>Thank You, Amelia Bedelia</i> . New York: HarperCollins	Parish, Herman. 2005. <i>Amelia Bedelia, Rocket Scientist?</i> New York: HarperCollins.
Parish, Peggy. 1966. <i>Amelia Bedelia and the Surprise Shower</i> . New York: HarperCollins.	Parish, Herman. 2005. <i>Be My Valentine, Amelia Bedelia</i> . New York: HarperCollins.
Parish, Peggy. 1971. <i>Come Back, Amelia Bedelia</i> . New York: HarperCollins.	Parish, Herman. 2006. <i>Amelia Bedelia Under Construction</i> . New York: HarperCollins.
Parish, Peggy. 1972. <i>Play Ball, Amelia Bedelia</i> . New York: HarperCollins.	Parish, Herman. 2007. <i>Amelia Bedelia's Masterpiece</i> . New York: HarperCollins.
Parish, Peggy. 1976. <i>Good Work, Amelia Bedelia</i> . New York: HarperCollins.	Parish, Herman. 2008. <i>Amelia Bedelia and the Cat</i> . New York: HarperCollins.
Parish, Peggy. 1977. <i>Teach Us, Amelia Bedelia</i> . New York: HarperCollins.	Parish, Herman. 2008. <i>Amelia Bedelia Talks Turkey</i> . New York: HarperCollins.
Parish, Peggy. 1979. <i>Amelia Bedelia Helps Out</i> . New York: HarperCollins.	Parish, Herman. 2009. <i>Amelia Bedelia's First Day of School</i> . New York: HarperCollins.
Parish, Peggy. 1981. <i>Amelia Bedelia and the Baby</i> . New York: HarperCollins.	Park, Barbara. 1993. <i>Junie B. Jones and a Little Monkey Business</i> . New York: Random House.
Parish, Peggy. 1985. <i>Amelia Bedelia Goes Camping</i> . New York: HarperCollins.	Terban, Marvin. 2007. <i>Eight Ate: A Feast of Homonym Riddles</i> . New York: Houghton Mifflin.
Parish, Peggy. 1986. <i>Merry Christmas, Amelia Bedelia</i> . New York: HarperCollins.	Truss, Lynn. 2006. <i>Eats, Shoots & Leaves: Why Commas Really Do Make a Difference!</i> New York: GP Putnam's Sons.
Parish, Peggy. 1988. <i>Amelia Bedelia's Family Album</i> . New York: HarperCollins.	Walton, Rick. 1998. <i>Why the Banana Split</i> . Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith.

Close Cousins: Colloquialisms

beat around the bush	hold your horses	raining cats and dogs
draw the drapes	keep your chin up	strip the bed
dress the turkey	lend me your ear	tie the knot
drive me up a wall	let the cat out of the bag	toe the line
flea market	on pins and needles	under the weather
hit the hay	out on a limb	
hit the sack	put a sock in it	

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not note a related activity that has been shown to help upper elementary students who struggle with comprehension, which requires that students pay attention to multiple components of individual words. Several researchers have shown that upper elementary and middle school students' sensitivity to meaningful word parts—or morphemes—such as prefixes, roots, and suffixes, contributes to their reading comprehension (Carlisle 2000; McCutchen, Logan, and Biangardi-Orpe 2009; Nagy, Berninger, and Abbott 2006). Not only that, but when struggling comprehenders are taught to attend to word parts as clues to meaning, their comprehension improves (Katz and Carlisle 2009; Tomesen and Aarnoutse 1998).

The Purpose of the Instructional Activities: Opening Minds to Multiple Meanings

Words and sentences frequently have multiple possible meanings, and readers' ability to consider those meanings affects comprehension. Ambiguous language forms like homonyms, homophones, sentences, compound words, jokes, and riddles—and even sentences with misplaced punctuation (such as those featured in the children's book, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: Why, Commas Really Do Make a Difference!* by Lynn Truss, see Figure 5-2)—offer opportunities for word callers to practice thinking about multiple meanings at one time, fostering a more flexible approach to text. The instructional activities described in the next section are thus designed to help poor comprehenders do just that, by enhancing their ability to consider multiple meanings at one time.

Instructional Activities

In this section I will describe research-tested activities that you can do with your word callers to foster a more flexible approach to text by helping them become more aware of multiple meanings. Yuill and Zipke and colleagues found that these activities are effective when taught in different lessons on different instructional days, rather than all together within one lesson. Thus, you might do each

of these activities on separate instructional days or choose one activity on which to focus each week. Also, these activities are engaging and effective for more able readers, too.

Discussing and Generating Homonyms and Homophones

Begin this lesson by telling your students that sometimes words can sound the same but have different meanings. Explain that when words are spelled the same way and have different meanings, they are called *homonyms*. To introduce your first homonym, rely on children's prior knowledge to present the concept. Ask them if they know two meanings for the word *ball*. Usually, because they are familiar with the Cinderella story, children have heard *ball* used to refer to a dance. Further, they all have experience with basketballs, baseballs, and the like. Thus, you can guide discussion of the multiple meanings for *ball*, based on children's past experience. Other homonyms that might be familiar to your students include *bat* (baseball equipment or flying animal), *duck* (a quacking bird or the act of lowering oneself suddenly), and *gum* (a sticky substance we chew or a part of the mouth).

Next, explain that sometimes words can sound the same but have different spellings, and these are called *homophones*. (You might point out that the word part *-phone* reminds us of a telephone and lets us know that the words sound the same even if they aren't spelled alike.) To draw on your students' experience with a common homophone, ask them if they know what *night* means. Your students will undoubtedly talk about the time of day when it's dark outside. However, they are likely familiar with *knights*, too, the brave individuals who fought dragons. Guide your students' discussion so that they discover these two meanings. Other homophones that might be familiar to your students include *hare* (a rabbit) and *hair* (on our heads), *right* (correct or opposite of left) and *write* (the act of marking words on paper), *tale* (a story) and *tail* (an appendage on an animal), and *sea* (an ocean) and *see* (to visualize).

After you introduce homonyms and homophones, have your students generate as many homonyms and homophones as they can, and support them in this process by saying words and having the students think of the multiple meanings. See the resources at the end of this chapter for published lists of homophones and homonyms to help you with this task. To extend this activity you might have your students draw pictures of the different meanings of their homonyms or homophones. Or, you might have them write sentences with their homonym or homophone pairs, such as *I write with my right hand*, or *Cinderella tripped on a ball at the ball*. Save the lists your students generated in this lesson for a later activity on jokes and riddles.

Discussing and Generating Compound Words

This activity involves finding multiple meanings for compound words. Remind your students that compound words are long words made of smaller words, like *butterfly*, *bulldog*, or *eyeball*. Ask your students if they know what *butterfly* means.

This question will undoubtedly produce much commentary on the various kinds and colors of butterflies your students have encountered. Commend them for knowing the regular meaning of *butterfly*, and then, ask your students if they can think of another meaning for *butterfly*—a silly meaning. If they have trouble, give them a hint: tell them to think about the two little words that make up the word *butterfly*. If necessary, guide them to consider that *butterfly* could also mean a stick of butter with wings or a fly made of butter. Once your students have grasped the multiple potential meanings for *butterfly*, present another compound word with which your students have some familiarity, such as *eyeball*, and ask them to think of two meanings for that word. See the resources at the end of this chapter for published lists of compound words. Finally, have your students generate their own compound words with multiple meanings for each. Have them explain their choices. To extend the activity, you can have them draw pictures of the regular and silly meanings of one of the compounds they generated.

Looking Closely at Words

As I mentioned earlier, some struggling students benefit from learning how to pay attention to the internal structure of words because words' parts, or morphemes, provide important clues children can use to discover meaning. Take the word *discover*, for example, which is composed of *dis-* and *cover*. These separate parts can help students understand that *discover* means *to take the cover off of something*. This analysis requires that students understand the meaning of *cover*, but it also requires that they understand the meaning of the prefix *dis-*. Katz and Carlisle (2009) engaged struggling readers in several activities to increase their awareness of word parts, which can be easily implemented in your classroom. Each of these activities makes struggling readers more explicitly aware of the different kinds of parts found in words and how those parts affect meaning. (Consult *The Reading Teacher's Book of Lists* [Fry and Kress 2006] to find words appropriate for each of these activities; see the citation at the end of this chapter.)

- You can provide children lists of words with extra morphemes, such as *cats*, *fuzzy*, and *purred*, and have your students highlight the base words (*cat*, *fuzz*, and *purr*) to help them separate roots from affixes (e.g., prefixes, suffixes) and understand how each affects meaning.
- You can provide children lists of words with affixes and have them highlight the “fixes” (Katz and Carlisle 2009) by underlining all the affixes in the list.
- Students can sort words by morphological similarities. For example, words could be sorted into different piles according to similarity in roots' meanings, or words could be sorted by whether they have prefixes or suffixes, or students could sort by affixes' meanings.
- Another activity that helps students become aware of word parts' meanings is to give them a set of words that includes several words with the same morphemes, and then ask the students to come up with a definition for the words' parts. They might think of additional words with similar morphemes if they get stuck. For example, you might give your students the words *undo*, *unhappy*,

uncomfortable, return, remind, and redo. Students would have to discover meanings for *un-* and *re-*.

- Finally, you can provide students with roots and morphemes on cards, which students can combine to create words of their own. You might add a bit of fun by asking students to create nonsense words and then require them to explain the new words' meanings based on their knowledge of word parts' meanings. For example, students might combine *dis-* and *help* to form *dishelp*, which might mean *to harm someone* or *to prevent someone from doing something*.

Discussing and Generating Ambiguous Sentences

Sometimes sentences are structured such that they can be interpreted in two ways. I presented such a sentence earlier in the chapter: *The keys were found by the dog.* This sentence could mean that the keys were located next to the dog, or it could mean that the dog found the keys. Ambiguous sentences such as this one provide another opportunity for children to practice thinking about multiple meanings in text. Write the sentence, *The keys were found by the dog*, on the board or on chart paper, and ask your students what it means. Alternatively, you can ask them to draw a picture of what the sentence means and ask them to share their drawings. Then, ask your students if the sentence can mean something else. Guide them to the correct answer if necessary. Write another sentence on the board, or distribute such sentences on handouts, and ask your students to find the meanings in the sentences. To extend the activity, you might have your students draw pictures of each of the alternate meanings for an ambiguous sentence, or you might have students try to generate their own ambiguous sentences (even if they are just variants of the ones you presented, such as *The toy was found by the baby*, which could mean that the toy was next to the baby or that the baby found the toy). Here are some ambiguous sentences to use for this activity. Additionally, in the resource section at the end of this chapter there is a website with ambiguous (and silly) headlines. Lynn Truss' (2006) children's version of *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* provides additional sentences appropriate for this lesson.

The boy chased the dog on his bike. (Either the boy was riding, or the dog was riding.)

The cow hit the farmer with the horn. (Either the cow hit the farmer with the cow's own horn, or the cow hit the farmer who was holding a horn.)

Sally used the computer on the desk. (Either the computer was on the desk, or Sally was on the desk.)

John ran into the house. (Either John ran inside the house—probably through a door—or John collided with the house.)

I eat my pancakes with sausage. (Either I eat pancakes and sausage in the same meal, or I use sausage as a utensil to eat my pancakes.)

Discussing and Generating Jokes and Riddles

As noted earlier in the chapter, jokes and riddles that rely on ambiguous words provide a wonderful way for students to practice thinking about multiple meanings of text. As in the previous lessons, begin with a question for your students, but this time make the question a riddle, such as the newspaper riddle with which I introduced the chapter. Ask your students why the riddle is funny, and guide them to discover the multiple meanings of the homophones *red* and *read*. Explain that a riddle is a question, and its answer is silly because it has a different meaning than the one in the question. Discuss a few more riddles to ensure your students grasp the concept (see Figure 5-1 for examples). Explain to your students that they will be making their own riddles, and ask them for an example of a homonym or homophone. Scaffold their construction of a riddle. Extend the activity by having students use their homonym and homophone lists from a previous lesson to make riddles of their own, and ask the students to explain why the riddles are funny. Students' explanations should include both meanings of their ambiguous words. Consider this example of a teacher working with one student.

TEACHER: Can anybody tell me two meanings for the word *night*? (Note that children don't see the word, they only hear it, so spelling is irrelevant at this point.)

STUDENT: I know! It's like when it's dark outside, and knight can also be that guy who kills dragons!

TEACHER: Exactly! Well, today we're going to think of our own riddles, like the newspaper riddle. Remember, the newspaper riddle was tricky because the question sounded like it was talking about the color red, but the answer to the riddle was about when you read the newspaper—it was read all over! Riddles are tricky because they start with a question about one meaning, and then the answer is about a different meaning! Let's try to make a riddle about night. What can we ask about night?

STUDENT: Well, night comes after day, so we could ask what night comes after.

TEACHER: Good. That's a good start. So, now let's think about the other meaning for night. What do knights go after? What did you tell me about those people who are knights?

STUDENT: Oh, yeah! Knights go after dragons! They chase dragons. So, we could ask What does the night go after? Then, everybody's gonna think day. And, then we can say The knight goes after a DRAGON! (Laughs.)

TEACHER (*Laughing*): That's a great riddle with a tricky answer. You're right. When you asked What does night go after?, that made me think about day, and then you surprised me with an answer that was about the other meaning for knight—the person who chases dragons! Good job using both meanings!



Zipke's (2008) *Reading Teacher* article provides additional description of the riddle generation process and is reprinted on the Reading Rockets website at the following web page: www.readingrockets.org/article/28315#meanings.

Exploring Multiple Meanings in Texts

Select a book, such as an Amelia Bedelia book, that permits discussion of multiple meanings to read aloud to your students (see the list in Figure 5-2). Prior to the lesson, read the book and list the instances in which Amelia Bedelia makes mistakes because she misinterprets ambiguous words or sentences. Before you read the story to your students, remind them (or explain to them, for children unfamiliar with the book series) that Amelia Bedelia makes many mistakes because she gets confused about the meanings of words. Then, as you read the text aloud to your students, have them raise their hands when they note one of Amelia's mistakes. Discuss each instance, provide relevant background knowledge if necessary (e.g., if your students do not know that *draw* can mean *open*), and have your students explain Amelia's mistakes, scaffolding their explanations to ensure that they grasp the multiple meanings in the ambiguous language that prompted the mistakes. Figure 5-2 includes many different texts that will work for this purpose.

More Ideas for Developing Wordplay and Awareness of Multiple Meanings

The research-tested activities in this chapter are fun, and they provide great ways for children to understand that words and texts can have multiple meanings. This section suggests other, related ways that you might promote this kind of wordplay in your classroom.

Homophone Detectives

You might consider choosing a homophone (or homonym)-a-day to feature in your classroom. Tell your students the secret homophone each morning, and have your students “catch” you using the multiple forms of the daily homophone. Each time they catch you, they could write the appropriate form on the board or put a marble in a “homophone jar” to work toward earning a class prize. In upper grades you might designate a word sleuth each day to identify ambiguous words in class (e.g., in texts, in your speech or peers’ speech, etc.) and make the sleuth responsible for adding the “discovered” words to the homophone/homonym list on the word wall or on the board.

Homophone Hangman

All students enjoy the classic game of hangman, in which players guess words letter by letter based on clues. Homophone hangman provides clues to both meanings for ambiguous words, with blanks for each form. For example, you might write the following clues on the board.

a bunny wig

Have your students guess, letter by letter, according to the traditional hangman rules to find the correct answer (hare hair). Homophone hangman helps to make students aware of the multiple meanings and spellings for homophones.

Find the Fake

In this game, you should write homophones on the board (or on chart paper, the overhead projector, etc.) and include a nonword that, when pronounced, would sound the same as the words in the homophone set. For example, you might write these sets of words on the board.

there	their	thare
bear	bair	bare
chepe	cheap	cheep

Then, have your students find the fake words. In order to provide a correct answer, they must tell the meanings of the real forms and then identify the false form. Variations on this activity would permit the students to make up their own meanings for the fake forms or to generate their own sets of words, including a “fake” one (Make the Fake).

Silly Stories

To learn new vocabulary words, we often have children use the words in authentic writing assignments. This activity can be adapted to help your students master the multiple meanings of homophones. Have your students use homophone pairs (or multiple homophone pairs) to write silly stories that students can share with one another, fostering discussion of homophones to support understanding of multiple meanings. Or, you might combine your students’ silly homophone stories into a book that can be placed in the classroom library. For younger students, a silly sentence with a picture would serve the same purpose. (I expect you will see many pictures of Aunt Ant and bare bears!)

Memory (Concentration)

Another way to help your students learn about homophones is to use the homophones (or their meanings) in a memory game, sometimes called concentration. This works well for buddy work or at a literacy center. Create cards with homophones on them, one word per card, so that you have several pairs or sets represented. Shuffle the cards and have the students lay them face down on a desk or table. Students take turns turning over pairs of cards to find homophone pairs. If a student finds a pair, he gets to keep the cards, and the student with the most pairs at the end of the game is the winner. This activity will help children recognize homophones in pairs or sets.

Remember, the coordination of multiple *meanings* in homophone sets is what helps students improve their flexible thinking, because they learn to think about each pronunciation in multiple ways. Thus, to help your students improve their focus on meanings in this activity you should create a second memory game with *only meanings* on the cards. Game play proceeds in the same manner, but students must match the meanings of words in a homophone pair. For example, “your parent’s sister” and “a small bug” would be appropriate definitions for *aunt* and *ant*, respectively, and only the definitions should appear on the cards. This more advanced memory game assumes that your students already have knowledge of homophone pairs.

The following section includes additional resources you can use to find homonyms, homophones, compound words, ambiguous sentences, and riddles to support your instruction. For struggling comprehenders and able readers alike, all of the activities presented in this chapter can be fun. Wordplay motivates students to learn, and you can use these enjoyable activities to motivate flexible thinking about meaning in your students.

Resources for Teaching Children to Consider Multiple Meanings

Homonym Resources

www.enchantedlearning.com/english/homonyms/

www.funbrain.com/whichword/index.html

www.homonym.org/

Fry, Edward, and Jacqueline Kress. 2006. *The Reading Teacher's Book of Lists*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Compound Words Resources

www.enchantedlearning.com/grammar/compoundwords/

Fry, Edward, and Jacqueline Kress. 2006. *The Reading Teacher's Book of Lists*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Ambiguous Phrase Resources

www.fun-with-words.com/ambiguous_headlines.html

www.idiomsite.com/

Jokes and Riddles Resources

www.azkidsnet.com/riddles.htm

<http://tiki.oneworld.net/fun/jokes/jokes.html>

<http://kids.niehs.nih.gov/jokes.htm#jokes>

www.squiglyplayhouse.com/JokesAndRiddles/index.html

Fry, Edward, and Jacqueline Kress. 2006. *The Reading Teacher's Book of Lists*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

How Does This Help You?



Questions to Consider

- Activities presented in this chapter promote play with language to support the development of word consciousness and comprehension. Identify three points in the instructional day in which this kind of wordplay might be naturally incorporated.
- Do you already have texts in your classroom library that include jokes, riddles, compound words, or ambiguous words or phrases? If so, how would you use these texts to increase your students' awareness of multiple word meanings? If not, look at the list in Figure 5-2 and consider which kinds of texts you might add to your classroom library and instructional routines to foster your students' awareness of multiple meanings.