Lynda Holmes illustrates how studying fourth-grade students’ language-play response discourses and sharing students’ patterns of thinking with them can lead to authentic assessment.

After reading the biography *The Glorious Flight* (Provensen, 1983) and talking with his peers about the book in a group where students choose their own discussion topics, one of my fourth-graders responded that Louis Bleriot would have had a “glorious fright” instead of a glorious flight if he had run out of gas in his historic flight across the English Channel. In language-play experiences such as this one, children explore and challenge the phonological, syntactic, and/or semantic rules of language in ways that further their linguistic abilities (Bruner, Jolly, & Sylva, 1976; Cazden, 1976; Garvey, 1977; Nilsen & Nilsen, 1978) and provide unique insights about their meaning construction (Labbo, 1996). Additionally, talking with peers about shared literature allows students to make decisions about their work, including planning, organizing, setting goals, and evaluating (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). Such talk is representative of an open activity, rather than a closed activity. A closed activity, in contrast, is characterized by the I-R-E format, in which the teacher initiates talk with students, students respond to the teacher’s directions, and the teacher subsequently evaluates student responses (Cazden, 1988; Mehan, 1979).

This article explores fourth-graders’ language-play responses to literature through an examination of the kinds of activities that foster language-play response and a discussion of what is meant by language play.

**OPEN ACTIVITIES**

Open activities provide students with opportunities for challenge, autonomy, and social collaboration (Turner, 1997). When teachers observe and listen to students participating in open activities, such as journal writing and telling stories about literature-response experiences, they become privy to particular response discourses that students use to order their thinking. For example, many fourth-graders use language-play discourse in literature response as they combine mental imagery and prior knowledge to expand their literacy development (Holmes, 1996). Teachers can study students’ emergent knowledge (Vygotsky, 1967; Fein, 1992) inherent in the use of language-play discourse and subsequently alter their teaching to accommodate individual students’ academic...
needs. This assessment is authentic in that it emphasizes the active engagement of teachers and students in the assessment process (Hiebert, Valencia, & Afflerbach, 1994).

INVENTIVE AND CONVENTIONAL LANGUAGE PLAY

According to Marzollo and Lloyd (1972), play affords unlimited opportunities for elaborating, recombining, and reworking old ideas in the light of new discoveries. Language-play discourse used by fourth-graders is likewise characterized by what Wells (1997) describes as convention and invention, or the relationship between cultural continuity and individual originality. Inventive language play occurs when standard rules of speech are broken through the use of reversals, substitutions, ambiguities, sound similarities, or rhymes (Kohl, 1981); thus, it springs from conventional language usage. However, students also use existing, conventional, folkloric language play such as folk speech and metaphorical proverbs to order their thinking. At times, they use a combination of conventional and inventive language play to express themselves in literature response.

Folk speech includes slang and idiomatic expressions that are widely shared and used in folklore traditions (Oring, 1986). Some of these expressions are shared through many generations, while others are shared currently. Examples: “It’s raining cats and dogs” and “That’s cool, dude.” Metaphorical proverbs are statements passed on in fixed form by oral transmission that convey some ethical or philosophical truth. They make a point that may only be made less succinctly or effectively in a speaker’s own words (de Caro, 1986). Example: “Here today, gone tomorrow.”

CONVENTIONAL LANGUAGE PLAY AS RESPONSE DISCOURSE

To illustrate the concept of language play as response discourse, I draw on the following excerpt from a fourth-grade literature discussion session about the realistic fiction book The Trouble with Tuck (Taylor, 1981). This book is about a dog who goes blind, and the experiences that the dog and his owner (Helen) have as they deal with his blindness. Students in the group chose to discuss the issue of animal experimentation and whether or not animals should be used in medical experimentation for research. One student (Student 5) listened to his four peers for a while, and then spoke his mind rather eloquently with a metaphorical proverb:

STUDENT 5: Not with dogs (shaking his head slowly back and forth and speaking in a somber, deliberate tone of voice), cause . . . dog . . . is . . . man’s . . . best . . . friend.

Through the use of conventional, folkloric language play in a well-known metaphorical proverb, this student revealed the critical comprehension described by Lipson and Wixson (1991) and Morrow, Sharkey, and Firestone (1993), in which he makes a comparison and a value judgment. That is, he not only compared the dog to a friend whom one likes and depends upon, but he expressed the thought that one would not be likely to offer one’s best friend for medical experimentation. However, this example of language-play response discourse and the context of the discussion group that instigated it represent literacy development that goes beyond the elaboration of linguistic abilities and comprehension through literature response. It presents me, the teacher, with an opportunity to study my teaching strategies with this student in another content area, specifically one in which he shows low achievement. For example, as this student struggles with the understanding of science concepts, he might further his cognitive abilities in science through social interaction and discussion of the concepts with his peers as they construct meaning together (Leal, 1993). The student’s language-play literature response and the teacher’s study of it highlight a teaching/learning strategy that could be effective in supporting his literacy development in another content area. For instance, I could act on this insight, striving to give this student collaboration time with his peers to aid in his understanding of difficult scientific concepts (e.g., distinguishing between the earth’s rotation versus the earth’s revolution around the sun). Additionally, I might share this insight with the student so that he is aware of his expertise in summing up ideas presented orally by others. In this way, the student can be taught to use his own patterns of thinking and expression in response discourse to further his achievement and understanding in a content area that is sometimes difficult for him to negotiate.

INVENTIVE LANGUAGE PLAY AS RESPONSE DISCOURSE

Language play is not restricted to oral language but may come out in journal responses to literature. The following
example taken from a fourth-grader after reading the book *The Trouble with Tuck*, is illustrative (See Figure 1).

Prior to the writing activity, students were told that they could choose any kind of writing for their responses. This student wrote a two-part response: in the first part the student summarizes the main idea in the book and gives opinions and personal thoughts about the story; in the second part of the response, she incorporates a combination of conventional and inventive language-play using rhyme, folk speech (colloquialisms), and sound similarities (sound patterns) to express her thinking: “Gona Be your midy Tucky Lazy Dazy you be ware Gona be the meaniest Dog with Quiet so much hair.” As she invents the rhyme “Lazy Dazy” to name Daisy, the helper dog who was instrumental in the handling of Tuck’s blindness, she characterizes Daisy’s passive training in a personal way. She uses sound similarity (sound patterns) with rhyme (“your midy Tucky”) to think beyond the text (Morrow, Sharkey, & Firestone, 1993), calling on her ability to put herself in the place of Tuck to imagine his thoughts. She uses folk speech (colloquialisms) (“I just can’t wate to Be the talk of the town”) to express what she interprets as Tuck’s desire to be special despite his blindness.

I wonder if this student could extend her high-level thinking skills in the content area of mathematics.

As I study this written language-play response, I wonder if this student could extend her high-level thinking skills in the content area of mathematics (an area she struggles with conceptually) if given time and instruction to do writing in which she envisions herself as one of the concepts in the math lessons. For example, in order to understand the concept behind the problem 3 × 16 = 48, she might do writing in which she writes from the viewpoint of being one of three cats, each eating 16 pieces of tuna. Taking time to act on this insight by showing the student her prowess with writing and inviting her to use her strengths with math concepts could help her to achieve in an area that has eluded her in its emphasis on drill-and-skill computational activities.

**INVENTIVE SOUND SIMILARITIES**

Another example of inventive language play used in journal writing is found in the following excerpt written by one of my fourth-graders in response to the first half of the book *The Castle in the Attic*, by Elizabeth Winthrop (1985) (See Figure 2). This book is a fantasy about a boy, William, who uses the magic of a castle given to him by his baby-sitter to boost his self-confidence and help him learn to solve his own problems. A knight from the castle, Sir Simon, becomes William’s friend.

Sound similarities (sound patterns) are prominent in the words “sice” for “size,” “live” for “life,” and “ooh will” for “oh well.” This student struggles in spelling but he is proficient in other content areas, including social studies, science, math, and reading comprehension skills. He thoroughly enjoys writing creatively and having choices about the kind of writing he does. He chose to write a letter to the Sir Simon char-

![Figure 1. Enhanced Copy of Student Writing Sample, The Trouble with Tuck](image1)

![Figure 2. Enhanced Copy of Student Writing Sample, Sir Simon Letter](image2)
character in the book *The Castle in the Attic*, in which he thinks beyond the text (Morrow, Sharkey, & Firestone, 1993). After studying his journal response and observing the spelling mistakes in consonant and vowel sounds, I showed him his inventive sound similarities (sound patterns) and reviewed their relationships to the correct spellings of those words, all the while praising him for his written expression and inferential comprehension in the letter he wrote to Sir Simon. I checked his knowledge of consonant and vowel sounds, realizing that he must proofread and check his phonological knowledge with his orthographic knowledge when writing the words down. As a result of this analysis and assessment, I invited him to use his strength of writing creatively to practice his spelling of words (Fresch & Wheaton, 1997). Immediately, his face lit up as he said that he would write a poem or a skit with that week’s spelling words. I suggested that he share the writing with other students, or with me, and then act, making a skit with that week’s spelling words. He let some fellow students act out the skit with him for the rest of the class. After the skit, we practiced each spelling word used in the skit as a spelling review for the whole class. Thus, the class as a whole benefited from this student’s motivation and resulting work.

**CONCLUSION**

When teachers invite students to participate in open activities, including journal writing and discussion sessions, they have opportunities to study students’ ways of making meaning. The discourses that children use in literature response reveal patterns of thinking that teachers can share with students and encourage them to utilize in various content areas, in order to broaden students’ cognitive development. Language play is one response discourse that fourth-grade students are using to make meaning from literature. Genuinely listening to students, studying their literature response discourses, and sharing students’ strengths with them can lead to authentic assessment that fuels learning.

**Children’s Books Cited**


**References**


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MEMBERSHIPS AVAILABLE IN THE NCTE COMMITTEE ON LANGUAGE AND LEARNING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

A limited number of memberships in the newly reconstituted Committee on Language and Learning across the Curriculum will be available to interested members of the Council. Major functions of the committee will be to identify subject matter associations that might be responsive to articles and convention programs on language across the curriculum; to ask knowledgeable NCTE members to prepare articles and convention program proposals for submission to those associations; and to explore other approaches to promoting language across the curriculum. If you would like to be considered for membership in this group, send a one-page letter by January 20, 1999, explaining your specific interest in the committee, relevant background, and your present professional work to: Administrative Assistant to the Associate Executive Director, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096.