Critical-Moment Teaching

During many fleeting moments of the school day, the focus of attention is on language as students and teachers perceive language issues, think or ideate about language, and present their ideas about language to others:

“How can tropical be a storm and mean a warm place at the same time?” asks fifth grader Rudy, who lives in snow-covered Buffalo, as he reads a novel.

“How come,” asks nine-year-old Marisue, reading a poem about a baby deer, “that a word like this [pointing to the noun does] is the same as this one [pointing to the verb does later on the same page]? It’s really confusing!”

Gordon, a third grader composing an article about a sports event, asks, “Do foot and ball go together when you are writing about a football game?” Inventing the need for compound words, Gordon decides to leave a smaller space between foot and ball than the spaces he usually leaves between separate words.

Younger children also spontaneously attend to language:

Five-year-old Monica asks her mother as they are driving home from school, “How come mom means mom and the means the; why can’t the mean mom and mom mean the?”

Legitimizing Critical-Moment Teaching

Kids often ask questions that reveal their interest in language—how it works and why it looks and sounds the way it does. In schools such wonderings about language occur within a range of contexts: during a current events discussion about problems in the Middle East, as teacher and students struggle with unfamiliar
names; during a science experiment on mixing chemicals, as students notice similar word beginnings or endings (aluminum/calciump or nitrate/nitrite); or during a game, as one or two children express their shock at the language another child uses as the competition heats up. Wonderment about language is not confined to scheduled times labeled “reading,” “writing,” or “language arts.” It occurs during discussions that relate to social studies, math, or music as the teacher and students use language to raise questions and learn new concepts about language. It occurs between the teacher and one student, in small groups, or during a whole class discussion. I call such language events critical teaching moments.

Such moments are critical because the queries, although often spontaneous, are of intense interest to the learner. They are critical because they heighten the students’ awareness of language as an object of study. They are critical because the students begin to wonder whether the ideas and concepts they are considering are true or fair or confusing. Such wonderings often occur when students become uncertain because of new knowledge or ideas. During such moments, learners are deeply engaged in considering alternative reasons for their developing concepts about language and its use; if the teacher responds appropriately, critical learning and thinking take place. Often these moments occur during students’ disequilibrium, in the Piagetian sense: when students are trying to understand and work out knowledge that doesn’t fit neatly into the schemas or constructs they have already developed (Duckworth, 1987), or when they ask provocative questions or express their wonderment out loud. If the teacher ignores students’ questions or doesn’t support their wonderment, the opportunity to take advantage of the critical moment is gone.

Such moments are critical teaching moments because the sensitive teacher takes the time to encourage the student’s inquiring stance, to encourage the learner’s interest in the topic, and to support risk-taking opportunities when a student expresses bewilderment or wonderment. These moments reveal what Vygotsky (1978) calls the zone of proximal development as the teacher’s responses to the students’ inquiries mediate and support students’ new and more complex learning. In this zone, learners, with the
Critical-Moment Teaching

help of teachers and the classroom community, discover a safe environment in which to reflect on new ideas, relate them to established knowledge, and take risks necessary for new learning to develop. Successful teachers are well aware of the power of critical moments. They know how to exploit them for their students’ benefit and are careful to respond in a timely fashion, because such moments pass quickly.

Whenever I think about critical teaching moments, the lessons raised by Albert Cullum’s *The Geranium on the Window Sill Just Died, but Teacher You Went Right On* (1971) comes to mind. Cullum reminds his readers of the gulf that separates young peoples’ views of school from those of too many teachers. His verse reminds adults in school settings of the importance of listening to students and learning from them:

The robins sang and sang and sang
but teacher you went right on.
The last bell sounded the end of the day,
but teacher you went right on.
The geranium on the window sill just died,
but teacher you went right on. (p. 56)

Critical-moment teaching is predicated on teachers listening attentively to their students and tuning into their questions and concerns, their wonderings and fears, their tentative beliefs, and the issues they raise. As I indicate in Chapter 2, this kind of careful attending is integral to ongoing authentic assessment, and I use the term *kidwatching* to refer to such observation and respectful conversation with students (Y. Goodman, 1978, 1985; Wilde, 1996). As we listen and observe carefully, students show us what they know and what they want to learn. By following students’ lead, teachers help students establish an environment in which important questions can be asked without fear of reprisal, and thus significant learning results.

Many aspects of teaching are similar to the aesthetic composition processes of artists, authors, and musicians. These pedagogical creative compositions are not magical. They can be observed, reflected on, recorded, transcribed, and analyzed so that others can understand their power (Taylor, 1993). I call such
awareness of teaching practices metapedagogy—the conscious reflection on why teachers do what they do (Whitmore & Goodman, 1996). As critical teaching moments are documented and analyzed, they become legitimized. Consequently, teachers become alert to such moments and refine the ways in which they respond to them. Such documentation becomes a regular part of teachers’ self-reflection and affects educational practice. It provides specific evidence that teachers use to articulate their practice. The growing focus on teacher research in teacher education programs is an acknowledgment of the importance of such documentation (Watson, Burke, & Harste, 1989; Whitmore & Goodman, 1996).

While some critical teaching moments are resolved quickly, others expand into strategy lessons (Chapter 4) or theme cycle studies (Chapters 5–7). In this chapter, I examine the nature of critical teaching moments as they occur during:

◆ spontaneous language interactions
◆ human and physical resource use
◆ conferences
◆ exploration of miscues
◆ building language traditions

These critical teaching moments are drawn from my own teaching or the stories I’ve gathered over the years from other teachers in classroom settings.

Spontaneous Language Interactions

Exploring language comments and questions with students helps them become conscious that conversations about language, which occur spontaneously, reveal their thinking and knowledge and are evidence that they are good language users interested in developing greater competence.

Unfortunately, the process of students asking questions has sometimes been trivialized so that even in graduate school, stu-
Critical-Moment Teaching

dents occasionally preface important questions about language with: “I know this is a dumb question, but . . .” Yet such questions in most cases lead to insightful discussions. The questions that students ask are just as important as the questions that teachers ask. In transmission model settings, teachers underestimate the importance of students’ questions and overemphasize teachers’ questions, which more often than not are trivial. Insightful teachers establish a tradition in their classrooms that there are no stupid questions, and they organize the language environment so that all students are comfortable asking any question and revealing their tentative thinking.

I was struck by the power of kids’ questions many years ago when I heard Courtney Cazden talk about a second grader who said to her one day, “Do you know, Ms. Cazden, big is a little word and little is a big word?” What a powerful spontaneous critical teaching moment for the teacher to respond, “Wow, what made you think that? You’re doing good thinking to ask such a question. I wonder if there are other big words that mean little and other little words that mean big? How could we find out?” When we discuss this language story in graduate classes, we learn a lot about morphemic forms of language and historical influences on the English language (for example, mini and maxi) as we explore the teaching and learning possibilities in response to such a question asked by a seven-year-old.

Inappropriate Language Use

When I taught eighth grade, I walked around my classroom observing my students’ writing. One day I came up to two students who were editing their compositions with each other and arguing over whether ain’t was an appropriate word to use in one student’s story. One student claimed that ain’t should never be used in writing, while the author argued that since it was part of the dialogue of the character in the story, it was not only possible but necessary. I asked the two students to present their arguments to the class. After a short discussion (the presentation and class discussion took less than ten minutes), we decided to write the question on the board: Can you use “ain’t” in writing? Our
discussion continued over time as we examined books and magazines, listened to television and radio broadcasts, and asked parents, high school English teachers, and a local journalist to contribute their views on this question. We learned about the variety of and strong points of view that people from different walks of life have about such language use. What started out as a critical-moment teaching event (students sharing their argument with the class) expanded into a strategy lesson (see Chapter 4) that focused on interviews the students conducted and reported on to the class. The students got so engaged in their learning that we developed an in-depth language study theme cycle on vernacular language (see Chapter 5). Although these discussions took place in the 1950s, not too long ago there was an article in the local newspaper about “a war of words” between the Houghton Mifflin publishing company and the American College Dictionary, published by Random House, over the acceptability of ain’t (Sibley, 1993). Language issues that my eighth graders argued about fifty years ago are still debatable today.

I can’t imagine a teacher not hearing at least once during the school year something like, “Oooooh, teacher, he say a bad word.” For some this issue may seem too much of a hot potato to deal with in school settings. In the communities where I taught, however, responding to what kids perceived to be “bad words” helped me diminish the problem of kids using such language to disrupt class. At the same time, it helped students explore the purpose and significance of bad words, slang expressions, and teenage language registers. In my classes, I could always count on students bringing to the class’s attention issues concerning questionable language. I realized that when students used inappropriate language in class, especially early in the year, they did so not simply out of anger or as a put-down; rather, the function was to shock the teacher—to test my responses and show their peers how tough they were. They were always disarmed when I didn’t respond with righteous indignation but instead engaged them in several minutes’ exploration of the functions such language served for them. They were surprised by my reaction and soon realized that the language they used had no shock value for me and that I used such language opportunities to focus the class on conversa-
Critical-Moment Teaching

tions about language. They were also astonished to discover that there were academic books dealing with the subject of such language use and that there were linguists who studied such phenomena (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990).

When teachers reject such language usage out of hand, it is easy for students to develop negative attitudes about themselves as language users. If instead teachers take advantage of such critical teaching moments, they can have students inquire into the nature of why certain usages are considered inappropriate and whether there are contexts in which they are acceptable. As a result, students become aware that language issues are controversial and that they have a role in exploring the issues and building their own knowledge and points of view.

Another example of a spontaneous critical-moment response to inappropriate language is described by Maureen Morrisey (1989), a third-grade whole language bilingual teacher:

Bianca and Jessica came running up to me to tell me that Mara, a monolingual Spanish speaker, had told them “shut up.” I laugh at the memory of the expressions on their faces when my eyes lit up and I exclaimed, “That’s great! These are Mara’s first words in English.” I explained my reaction to the two girls as we went to tell Mara some other ways to say “shut up” in English. She was receptive to our offers of new ways to express herself and she walked away armed with new English words to meet her need for quiet or to be left alone. (p. 87)

A number of learnings took place during this critical-moment teaching. Not only did Mara learn that language she thought she understood meant something different, but also both Bianca and Jessica became aware that children learning a second language sometimes say things that do not fit the context. The students explored the pragmatics of language use—what language is appropriate and inappropriate given specific language contexts. Maureen Morrisey’s elaboration with these students during the few minutes they needed to explore their concerns added a dimension to their understanding of second language learning.

It takes only a few moments to inquire with students into why certain language is considered inappropriate, to find resources
to discover what others think about this issue, and to discuss solutions that include the responsibility language users must take for what they say and how they use language.

**Exploring Punctuation**

After considerable study of the animals they love in their homes, the third graders in Jodi North’s class agreed that they would like to put on a pet zoo. Following class discussion, the students went off to their tables to write a profile of their pets. After working for a few minutes, Bill came up to the teacher and said: “You know, Mrs. North, I need a sad mark to write about my pet. Remember my dog got run over on Halloween night in front of the school?”

Mrs. North responded thoughtfully, “Bill, I don’t think there are any sad marks, but maybe you could make one up.” Bill returned eagerly to his writing. When he showed her his work, she told him that she had a university teacher who would be very interested in his invention. A few days later I received the following letter (note the punctuation mark after the word *died* in Figure 5):

```
Dr. Yetta Goodman,

I’ve invented a new punctuation mark:
A mark for something sad. It is used in a sentence like this:
I had a dog; it died; it does look funny,
but it will get better looking soon, just like all of the others.

Mrs. North’s student:
Bill Patton
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**Figure 5:** Bill Patton’s sadlamation point.
Critical-Moment Teaching

While I was discussing with Julie Jensen, then editor of *Language Arts*, the possibility of publishing Bill’s letter (Y. Goodman, 1979, p. 482), there was a flurry of activity in Mrs. North’s classroom. The spontaneous language interaction she had with Bill, which took just a minute or two, led to interest on the part of all the third graders and experimentation in the uses and limitations of punctuation. Mrs. North took advantage of this critical moment to highlight the students’ interest by involving them in Bill’s invention of the sadlamation point (he named it), and the class thoughtfully began to consider the functions that punctuation serves in written language, thus moving them into a theme cycle study. The students and Mrs. North learned a great deal about punctuation as they extended their language study.

I may have learned the most from this experience because from that time on, I not only continued my research into students’ invented spellings, but also began to systematically collect and study children’s invented punctuation as well. Bill Patton clued me in to his inventive powers in the first sentence of his letter to me. I also noticed his use of the colon after his closing: “Mrs. North’s student.” Since then I have collected hundreds of young writers’ punctuation inventions, become attuned to the fact that authors and poets experiment with punctuation, and have noted that the controversial nature of many punctuation conventions leads to interesting discussions among linguists and other language scholars. These are discoveries that teachers and students make as well as they explore the ways in which they segment written language and why they do so. Such explorations are often touched off during critical-moment teaching.

Human and Physical Resource Use

Resources available in the classroom, the school, and the community provide powerful contexts for critical-moment teaching, and discussions often help students become explicitly aware of the many possible ways to find answers to language questions in the social context of the entire community as well as in the school.

With a team of other researchers, I documented the learning that occurred when kids had the use of classroom resources dur-
ing their daily writing time, and we discovered the ways in which critical-moment teaching influences students who are becoming independent language learners. We conducted this study with Tohono O’odham third and fourth graders in the Indian Oasis School District (Y. Goodman & Wilde, 1992). Wendy Kasten (1992), one of the researchers, categorized and analyzed the ways in which the students used both human and physical resources. As kids wrote, they interacted with teachers, other students, librarians, paraprofessionals, and other adults in the room and in the school. They used physical resources including dictionaries, trade books, chalk- and bulletin boards, calendars, book bags, posters, charts, and their own and other students’ published writing.

We concluded that when resources are easily accessible to students, they learn to “live off the land,” as Don Graves (1983) often says. In other words, they learn to be independent resource users who know they can consult many different materials and people to help them solve their problems and answer their questions. They become aware of ways to search for resources, especially when the teacher trusts them to be responsible and expects them to be mobile in the classroom and school in order to take maximum advantage of available resources. Students’ flexible use of resources in the classroom establishes an environment in which a community of learners experiences a wide range of oral and written language. During critical teaching moments, it is possible to talk about ways to use resources most efficiently, how to use them flexibly, and which resources are most helpful depending on the students’ purposes.

In Sr. Susan Caldwell’s fourth-grade class, the students’ resource use highlighted the importance of critical-moment teaching. Sr. Susan provided evidence of the critical role of the teacher and of the organization of the classroom environment in helping students use resources independently. The students had easy access to resources and used them whenever they were needed without asking permission. They went to the library corner in the room, used the charts on the walls, and discussed their problems with other students. Reference books, thesauruses, dictionaries, and atlases with a range of purposes, difficulties, sizes, shapes, and formats were set up on a rolling cart, and students were encouraged to move the cart to their table whenever they needed
Critical-Moment Teaching

it. Sr. Susan made her students responsible for the care and organization of these materials, so they were familiar with all the resources. Although she was available to discuss resource use and to answer questions, Sr. Susan’s goal was always to lead the students to work independently or with one another as much as possible.

Wendy Kasten (1992) documented a writing experience with Gordon, a student in Sr. Susan’s class, when he was writing a story and began to search for the spelling of the word *surround*. Consulting a large Webster’s unabridged dictionary, he turned to the s’s, starting at the very beginning of the section. He quickly became frustrated when he didn’t find the word. Gordon talked about his difficulties with a group of other kids and decided to use a picture dictionary that included easy words; there he found the word *round*. When he returned to his seat, he wrote *sround* in his story. Later, when Sr. Susan came over to Gordon’s table to observe the students at work, she asked Gordon to explain the strategies he had used to arrive at his spelling. The other kids at the table were rapt listeners. Gordon said that he knew that *surround* was a hard word, so he looked it up in the hard dictionary, but when he couldn’t find it there, he decided that if he spelled *round* correctly, he could edit his spelling later. He knew that the word *round* would be in the easy dictionary (p. 100).

The group at Gordon’s table considered different ways to use dictionaries and how they knew which words are in easy dictionaries and which are in hard ones. They explored the hard word/easy word issue and expanded their understanding of how to use dictionaries and which ones would be most helpful for specific purposes. A number of learnings emerged from this critical teaching moment. Wendy Kasten and I discovered that fourth graders have a sense of easy word and hard word categories and their placement in dictionaries (Y. Goodman & Wilde, 1992; Kasten, 1992). We concluded that having multiple kinds of dictionaries in a classroom was more beneficial to the students than having one set of the same dictionary for all the students. Sr. Susan learned about the strategies Gordon used in such situations, helped him become conscious of the knowledge he had, and, through discussion with other students, explored additional strategies for using various dictionaries and other resource books.
She helped him realize his syllabic knowledge, evident in his awareness that the word *round* was part of *surround*, and affirmed his strategy of waiting to edit his spellings later. She also used Gordon’s experience to plan strategy lessons on suffixes and prefixes and to discuss the need to think about second and third letters in a word when using a dictionary. Gordon, of course, learned that he had knowledge about how words are patterned and that he could use a number of acceptable strategies when he was writing and needed information about spelling. Such dynamic moments provide learning opportunities for all the participants in the event and highlight the social nature of learning.

Mario, another Tohono O’odham fourth grader, was writing about the Baboquivari Mountains, sacred to his people. He asked aloud for the spelling at the writing table where he was working with some classmates. Melanie ran to the window and looked out at the parked school bus with Baboquivari Warriors (the name of the high school football team) imprinted on its side. As she returned to the table with the name written on a piece of paper, Sr. Susan came over to the group, acknowledged the sophisticated use of resources, and engaged the students in a discussion of the range of resources available for discovering conventional spellings of unusual words. This spontaneous episode took less than five minutes.

I observed a similar experience at a writing table with six first graders in Vera Milz’s classroom in Michigan. Timmy looked at me and asked, “How do you spell *dinosaur*?” I responded honestly that I wasn’t sure of the entire spelling (I’m never sure of the two vowels that immediately precede the final *r*). Jennifer looked up from her writing and said, “Just a minute, Timmy,” and she went over to the bookcase and selected a book. Ms. Milz believes that primary-age children remember titles more easily than they remember author names, so the students in her class learn to shelve the thousands of books in their classroom library alphabetizing by title. The kids not only come to know the alphabet, but also build knowledge about titles and ways to independently search for books. It was easy, therefore, for Jennifer to take a book with *dinosaur* in the title off the shelf and bring it back to the table for Timmy to use. Jennifer, Timmy, and the rest of the group at the table talked for a few minutes about the kinds
of resources that are helpful when one wants conventional spellings and how it feels to be able to find such resources independently. These children use the terms *invented spelling* and *conventional spelling* with understanding because Ms. Milz uses the terms in their appropriate contexts.

Teachers such as Vera Milz and Susan Caldwell are aware of the rich resources available for both student and teacher use, and they organize their classrooms around these resources and discuss the independent use of classroom resources with their students. In addition, whenever the kids ask questions about how to find something, these teachers show the students how they themselves use specialized dictionaries and articles that are kept in a special file, or other materials that help the teachers support kids’ learning. In such classrooms, students explore the range of resources that are available to support their spelling development, as well as the most efficient ways to use them.

After a few such critical teaching moments, the students and the teacher list these resources and the ways to use them and post these lists wherever the resources are kept so that the ideas can be revisited later when questions about resource use come up again. I have seen charts with titles such as “Going on a Spelling Safari” or “Where to Find Story Ideas.” Both teacher and students periodically discuss and update the lists by adding helpful resources discovered as a result of the students’ spontaneous questions. The teachers encourage the students not to list “Ask the teacher” or “Ask our aide,” explaining the importance of students discovering additional expert human resources and not becoming overly dependent on the adults in the classroom. Librarians, the computer center teachers, and other specialist teachers are good resources for helping students become familiar with a range of new technologies. I recently took a graduate class that was working on a historical research project to the university library, and we were surprised by the new and expanding resources available on various networks that the resource librarian showed us how to access. Such research opportunities through or with new technologies are becoming more common in elementary and middle schools as well. It is important to help students find and critically use a range of resources that will allow them to explore their inquiries and discover the rich and voluminous
materials available on the Internet. One search engine I use for a variety of topics, particularly to find lists of books for children and adolescents, is Google. Students learn to gather information from different sources, evaluate the status of experts, and decide why they think some materials are more informative or dependable than others. This kind of discriminating ability is especially important in response to sources on the Internet, with its explosion of information by authors whose expertise and points of view are not easily verified.

Students also need to develop criteria by which to evaluate the usefulness of specific materials. Different student committees in the class can volunteer to become familiar with the rich range of resources, to understand when and how to use them, and to share their knowledge with others. These committees help the teacher establish a collection of resource materials that extend the students’ growing understandings. Students discover appropriate uses for dictionaries, thesauruses, and specialized word lists as well as becoming aware of the limitations of their use, and they learn how to recognize the latest information in dictionaries and thesauruses. These students become class experts who are available for other students whenever questions arise. Examining how bibliographies, telephone books, and Internet lists are compiled provides students with insight into questions about alphabetization, ways to establish categories, and the conventions of referencing. These explorations often lead to strategy lessons or theme cycles that culminate in students writing classroom resource books or producing lists of Web sites or bibliographies that focus on a range of language study issues.

As I work in classrooms with teachers and students, it is obvious that when the use of materials is constrained by mandates about what material is accessible and by limitations on when and how resources can be used, students lose precious opportunities to become responsible users and explorers of human and physical resources that enrich their language learning.

**Funds of Knowledge**

Everyone in the classroom should be aware of the funds of knowledge that other members in the class have. *Funds of knowledge* is
Critical-Moment Teaching

a concept developed by Luis Moll and colleagues (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; Moll & González, 1997) in studying the rich knowledge that members of working-class communities have as they support one another with their individual expertise. Members of a community, through their ongoing participation in the community, come to know which members are most helpful in specific instances: helping with medical problems, fixing cars, cooking special dishes, and so on.

Likewise, students in a collaborative classroom community become aware of their own and other students’ expertise and come to appreciate that everyone in the classroom community has contributions to make. They come to understand that different members of their classroom, school, or home communities are important resources. Some students are best at spelling, others listen well to the writing of their peers, some class members are the illustrators and artists in the class, and others are capable planners and organizers. Highlighting and using the expertise of individual class members expands language use in many ways. Students, for example, are often involved in planning a field trip. During such opportunities, students discuss phone etiquette and strategies for following the long phone menus to find out when museums are open or how to get through to an appropriate party in order to talk to an actual person. Students learn polite ways to ask the school office staff whether they may use the phones to plan their trips. These experiences are good listening lessons and occur in a few minutes in response to a question. Critical-moment teaching often results in students becoming conscious of how they ask questions to discover how others can be of help, learning the language appropriate for inviting people to speak in the class, and finding the materials available for showing appreciation to others. Such opportunities relieve the teacher of many duties that kids are capable of handling themselves; the students in turn learn a lot about language.

Conferences

Individual or group conferences are rich in critical-moment teaching opportunities for language learning. As Donald Graves (1983)
says, “When the child talks, we learn; when the child talks, the child learns; when the child talks, the teacher can help” (pp. 137–38). Although conferences are important settings for evaluation, they also include opportunities for getting to know a student well; providing students with the undivided attention of an interested and listening teacher; and helping students reflect on their own learning and future inquiries through self-evaluation. During conferences, issues arise spontaneously that lead to powerful critical-moment teaching, while others become the basis for planned strategy lessons or theme cycles. Teachers discover that conferences are integral to negotiating and expanding curriculum. Conference participants can include the teacher with an individual student, the teacher with a small group, or the teacher with the entire class. In some cases, as students become familiar with conference procedures a small group of students is capable of conferencing on their own and reporting back to the teacher.

In my university classes, I often plan whole class conferences during midterms. In my elementary and middle school classes, I held such conferences at a logical break such as the end of a day, a week, or a theme cycle. Such conferences are especially helpful when the learning experience in question has been either particularly constructive or ineffective. As a class, we evaluate and expand on the things that went well and make changes to improve those that didn’t work. I begin such group conferences by asking:

- What went really well that we should continue?
- What could have gone better?
- What responsibilities should each of us take to make our time together more effective?

I do not focus on any individual who did or did not contribute well. Rather, our overall concern is to plan and work better as a group. During such times, spontaneous issues often arise about the kind of language we use as we talk to one another, how the power relationships in a small group affect the group dynamics, how we all need to listen better and be more patient during turn taking. Such talk leads to discussion of the pragmatics of discus-
sion, which helps all the members of the class (including the teacher) consider how to relate to one another in positive ways. When students become aware of the value of conferencing and the teacher encourages discussions that are critical but positive, students learn to be supportive of one another. Not only do such conferences provide for critical teaching moments, but they also establish a sense of community in the classroom.

Conference Procedures

Holding conferences on a regular basis with large classes is initially overwhelming, especially to new teachers or teachers who have not conducted student conferences. Setting aside time for conferences means reorganizing class time. It is not possible to add to the school day without eliminating some aspects of the curriculum. Donald Graves (1983) as well as many other scholars concerned with the writing process discuss a variety of ways to organize conferences with students. They suggest questions the teacher can pose to help move students to think about language knowledge as they write:

- How can I help?
- What are you trying to say?
- What language are you using that you like?
- Have you described characters and scenes with enough detail for the reader to see what is happening?
- Does your dialogue sound the way people would speak to each other? (Atwell, 1998, p. 247)

Tommy Thomason’s (1998) and Carl Anderson’s (2000) recent books talk to teachers about their classroom experiences of conferencing with young authors. These authors include not only tips and myths about conferring with students but also check sheets, materials for teachers and students, and variations in procedures.

During reading conferences, I find the following questions useful:
LANGUAGE STUDY EXPERIENCES

◆ Are you understanding what you are reading?
◆ Are there words or phrases or sections of the text that you wondered about as you read? Show me what or where they are.
◆ Did the author use language that is especially interesting to you? Show me where that language appears.

Whenever it is appropriate, I follow up student responses with “Why do you think so?” This honest question on the teacher’s part turns the questioning stance into a conversation that helps the student believe the teacher is not interested in correct answers only but is genuinely interested in the student’s explorations, knowledge, and beliefs. Students’ responses often give me insight into how to lead the students to consider ways to solve their own problems.

In order to schedule uninterrupted conference time, teachers plan carefully with the students the kinds of experiences they can engage in independently or in small groups while the teacher is involved in conferences. Students come to value class time spent on conferences and usually work quietly. The students who are not involved in the conference should be doing valuable work that interests them (Turbill, 1982). The students know they will have their turn with the teacher and anticipate the teacher’s undivided attention for even a ten- or fifteen-minute period every few weeks. They are impressed with a teacher who demonstrates that students are important enough to spend time with, and they respond to such attention by taking their self-directed work in the classroom seriously.

As an upper-grade teacher, Debra Goodman often printed out weekly planning sheets for each of her students. She filled in the times on the plan when everyone was supposed to be together, such as class book reading, lunch, computer lab, and recess. In the conference time spaces, however, the students were responsible for filling in their own plans when they weren’t the conferee.

Some teachers encourage the nonconferring students to participate in “written conversations” with other students during conference time so they do not interrupt the conferences with loud talking. In written conversations, students write notes to one another to simulate talk rather than talking aloud.

— 66 —
Critical-Moment Teaching

I observed the class of an Australian teacher who kept a small bulletin board next to her desk that her kids used to pin notes to while she was conferencing. Small pieces of blue, pink, and red paper lay in a box next to the board. The students wrote a request to visit with the teacher on a blue note if they wanted the teacher to respond to them within the next few days. They wrote on a pink note if they wanted the teacher to see them the next day. A red note designated an emergency, and the teacher would respond as soon as possible. This teacher had great discussions with her students that helped them decide how to categorize their notes. In addition, she helped her students develop greater independence and responsibility for their own learning.

All students need to participate in conferences, but all students do not need the same amount of conference time or the same number of conferences. The time and focus of the conference will change over time as well. Students who are more capable of organizing and taking initiative may need fewer or shorter conferences, whereas other students need more and longer conferences. In self-contained classes, some teachers set aside an hour or two at regular times during the week for conferences. With departmental classes, middle school teachers set aside approximately 50 minutes at a regular time out of a 250-minute week. A regularly scheduled time helps students become used to conference routines. Early in the school year, a conference sign-up sheet divided into 10- to 15-minute intervals is useful because students who are reluctant to conference with a teacher can observe how it works and how the other students who sign up are treated. Of course, the teacher explains to the class the purpose of the conference and the procedures. The teacher also keeps track of who has had a conference and usually makes sure that all students have had at least one before another round of conferences starts up.

Not all conferences need to be held during a prescheduled period. Alan Flurkey discovered what he likes to call “over the shoulder” conferences as a first-grade teacher. As he moved around the classroom to observe his students at work, he would stand next to a table and interact with two students during buddy reading, or he would look over the shoulder of a child writing in her journal but looking up at him for help. Such kidwatching provides opportunities to learn about the knowledge students
have and the strategies they use, as well as a few moments for critical teaching (Y. Goodman, 1996a).

**Language Study during Conferences**

Conferences tend to spark conversations about language study that help students expand their language knowledge and give teachers ideas for strategy lessons or theme cycles that expand on language study issues.

Phyllis Whitin (personal communication, 2000) documents her discussion about language with Tony, a fourth grader, who was reading aloud during a reading conference:

I noticed that when Tony came to the phrase “citywide monorail system,” he repeated the word *citywide* and pronounced *monorail* slowly, saying “mon-o rail.” I wondered if the word had made sense to him. Within a few paragraphs the word appeared again, and this time he read it smoothly and naturally. He did not repeat anything preceding the word this second time. When Tony finished reading, he told me about the story. I then asked him if he remembered changing his mind about any part as he read it. (We had discussed how readers revise their thinking in their heads as they read.) He did not mention any part with “monorail” but another place instead. Next I told him that I had noticed that he read *monorail* more slowly the first time, but he read it easily after that.

He explained: “In first grade I’d stop and try to figure it [a word] out, or ask people. Then I found if you kept going you practiced the word. You teach yourself what it means.” A little later in the conversation he differentiated between fiction and nonfiction reading strategies (he read a lot of nonfiction, especially books that explained how machines and scientific phenomena work). He explained that when he reads nonfiction, if he comes to something he doesn’t understand, he often looks it up in the glossary.

Phyllis Whitin supported Tony’s comments by sharing with him how she did the same kinds of things when she read. Then she broadened his thinking by asking him to write down some of the strategies he used that helped him the most when he read. They kept the list of strategies in his folder and during subsequent con-
ferences considered how these strategies worked for him during his other reading experiences. With his teacher’s encouragement, Tony also shared these strategies with some of the other students he was working with in a literature study, to see if they used similar or different strategies.

Nancie Atwell (1998) describes writing conferences that focus on the content and craft of writing:

I listen, paraphrase, ask clarifying questions, nudge toward or suggest options if the writer needs them, and ask the writer to articulate what he or she plans to do next. My purpose is . . . to help writers discover the meanings they don’t know yet, name problems, attempt solutions, and make plans. (p. 224)

It is important for students to reflect on their own language use and to be self-critical, but it is also important for the teacher to consider what the students already know and what they do when they use language, and at the same time to help students recognize what they already know about language. During conferences in which students’ work is taken seriously, students come to value their own work. The teacher sends the message: “I think what you are learning about language is important. We are learning together what you know about language and what you still need to know.”

Exploration of Miscues

How language works is revealed to teachers and students alike when we explore the “errors” we make as we speak or write and the confusions or misconceptions we have as a result of listening or reading. Such explorations are especially relevant when we are involved in learning a second language (Y. Freeman & Y. Goodman, 1993; D. Freeman & Y. Freeman, 2000) or interacting with others who speak a dialect different from our own (Shaughnessy, 1997). Miscues provide opportunities for critical-moment teaching as teachers and students discuss the role and purpose of miscues in language use and language learning (Bettelheim, 1982; Y. Goodman, 1996b).
Ken Goodman’s (1965) study of reading miscues was initiated by his interest in what miscues tell teachers and researchers about how people read. He rejected the word *error* when he discovered that the unexpected responses readers make provide “a window on the reading process.” Miscues illuminate the knowledge students have about language and the strategies they use in order to make sense:

The reader is primarily concerned with making sense of everything. Sometimes that means keeping both the sense and the grammar but changing the wording; sometimes it means keeping the syntax but producing non-words. Most often in successful reading, the wording and grammar are the same as in the original text because readers control the process so well, not because they are accurately identifying words. Getting the words right is a by-product of making sense of the whole and not the other way around. (K. Goodman, 1996, p. 103)

I believe that all language miscues, whether in reading, writing, speaking, or listening, reflect our knowledge about language, language use, and subject matter, as well as our background. When a Chinese graduate student who has recently arrived in the United States asks my age, I could consider him rude. But when I understand that the student is showing his respect for me by asking such a question and I respond to him respectfully, then I show that I understand aspects of his culture. In my response, I share with him the information that it isn’t common to ask such a question in a U.S. context, which helps him expand his knowledge of the new culture he is adapting to. Miscues, of course, do cause misconceptions and miscommunications, but they are based on knowledge; they are neither random nor unexplainable.

The more knowledgeable that teachers become about miscue analysis, the greater insight they develop into the linguistic and conceptual strengths students bring to language use (Y. Goodman & K. Goodman, 1994). Recently I have involved readers in examining their own miscues (Y. Goodman & Marek, 1996). Although in subsequent chapters I suggest strategy lessons and theme cycles that help students understand their own miscues, miscues often occur during oral reading, collaborative
writing sessions, or oral presentations or discussions, paving the way for critical-moment teaching.

**Student Miscues**

During read-aloud time or when teachers are listening to kids read for evaluation purposes, teachable moments abound. Of course, not every miscue calls for a teachable moment—only those that present rich possibilities for interesting conversation. Following are a few examples that highlight miscues and critical-moment teaching.

Shoshana, an eleven-year-old with whom I have had many individual reading conferences, discussed what she does when she comes to something she doesn’t know while she is reading: “Well, sometimes I sound it out, but that usually doesn’t work. I usually pass it like a blank, like there was nothing there, and go on with the rest of the sentence until I can make it out, make sense of it, and then I know what it is.” Shoshana then explained that she is a good reader “because I know a lot and I know how to help myself if I try.”

**YETTA:** And how would you do that?

**SHOSHANA:** By just looking at the rest of the sentence. My mom says to use the context.

**YETTA:** What does that mean, to use the context?

**SHOSHANA:** To use the words around you... surrounding that... and try to make sense out of it and if it makes sense to you even though it’s not the right word. It’s like funny, and I say silly.

I responded to Shoshana by telling her that I value her thoughtful consideration of the reading process. I said that by focusing on what the language in her text means she is using strategies that proficient readers use. I let her know that her use of context showed me that she understood the story. We then discussed whether she might use her strategies differently depending on the importance of the word or phrase in the story. I encouraged her to continue discussing her reading with her mother and to share her insights with me as well.
During a reading conference with his teacher, second grader John was reading a story in which the word oxygen appeared a number of times. Each time he came to the word, he stopped and said to the teacher, “That’s that word I don’t know.” The teacher encouraged John to keep on reading by saying, “You can omit it or try to substitute something in that place that would make sense in the story. I often do that when I read.” She wanted John to discover that reading comprehension develops throughout the reading of a story and thus highlighted a strategy he could use when he was reading by himself. When he finished reading and was retelling the story to the teacher, John explained that the men in the story were not feeling well because something was wrong with the air. “Oxygen!” he called out, “that’s the word I didn’t know, oxygen!”

The teacher discussed with John how he was able to make personal discoveries about language and the reading process by trusting his own abilities, and she demonstrated that she valued his learning capabilities. She and John discussed the strategies he used to solve his own problem. He kept thinking about the word and developed meanings about the story by talking about it with the teacher. John came to believe that he was a more independent reader than he had thought.

As teachers and students explore the ways in which miscues reveal their knowledge and rarely reflect any serious language disorder, students come to understand the nature of error the way artists do. Illustrators of children’s literature who talk to kids about their work often refer to the ways in which they incorporate their errors into their work to take advantage of the effects—in other words, the errors have creative consequences.

When I discuss with teachers ways of helping students without immediately correcting their miscues, they often say that the students correct each other’s miscues immediately. I suggest that such responses are based on what students see teachers do. If teachers discuss the miscuing process with the class and explore the different strategies readers use during oral reading in addition to self-correction, students learn positive ways to help one another.
Critical-Moment Teaching

Teacher Miscues

Teachers’ miscues also provide opportunities for critical-moment teaching. Don Howard, who has worked with a range of primary-age students, tells other teachers how he responds positively when students notice the miscues he makes when he reads aloud to them. Whenever his students draw attention to his miscues, he stops to wonder out loud about the possible reasons for making the miscue. Mr. Howard is convinced that his acceptance of the kids’ responses to his miscues allows them to take greater risks as learners themselves and to be more comfortable when he helps them interrogate their own miscues. They begin to understand that miscues do not reflect something wrong but rather what they know about language and the strategies they use to make sense and communicate.

There are a number of ways for teachers to explore their miscues with their students (Y. Goodman, 1996a). When, for example, teachers are reading aloud to the class and substitute names for characters they are unfamiliar with or have trouble pronouncing, such as Rumpy for Rumplestiltskin or Ivan for Raskolnikoff, they should take advantage of a good critical teaching moment to stop and explain the strategies they are using. Or when they pronounce the names of authors (e.g., Chinua Achebe) or places (e.g., Warrambui) based on their own most informed guess using their English phonics rules for pronunciation purposes, they discuss these strategies with their students. This naming strategy—substituting a name that fits (maintaining characteristics of a character such as gender or ethnicity) or a place name that fits in terms of country of origin, and continuing to read in order to maintain the flow and interest of the story—is one that all proficient readers use to support their meaning construction (Y. Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 1996). Students need to know that teachers and other proficient readers make miscues similar to their own.

Although I am usually a good speller, I often find myself inventing spellings for some words as I write on the board. Once my principal called my attention to the fact that I had written baloon on the board. I shared that experience with my seventh
and eighth graders and told them that since parents and administrators are not keen on teachers who display misspellings, the students could help me out by checking my spelling for me. I wanted them to call any of my misspellings to everyone’s attention, and when they did, we discussed the kinds of invented spellings I made consistently, such as certain double consonants and double vowel patterns, and why I spell those particular words the way I do. Students learned about the stability of spelling rules and the importance of social conventions as we discussed my spelling. Then we would hold a short discussion about the social contexts in which it is usually important to use conventional spelling and when it is not so necessary. Through such discussions, I demonstrated for students ways to examine their own spellings.

In my university classes, I often discuss features of language as I’m writing on the board, reading to the class, or talking. I share my low-status dialect features, those differences in language use I have encountered and sometimes gotten in trouble over in different English-speaking countries. I share language that I am insecure about using in particular contexts because I’m not always confident that I understand their meanings. I often use as an example my history with the word *heuristic*, which I’ve learned to use more and more conventionally since I first read it almost forty years ago in Bruner’s *Toward a Theory of Instruction* (1966). I share the fact that I looked up this word in the dictionary but then read it in another context where the meaning was different. Eventually over time I found myself using the term in oral conversations first and finally in writing. Even now, however, I check my spelling. I want students to know that concepts about word meanings develop over time and that certain words are easier to use in some contexts than in others. Realizing that teachers are not perfect spellers or writers of language, that they use strategies to solve language problems, and that they also struggle as language users helps students demystify the notion that language has some perfect and correct form that is inaccessible to most of them. Such discussions rarely take more than a few minutes and are often stimulated by a student’s question or the teacher’s exploration of his or her own miscues and insecurities as a reader, writer, speaker, or listener.
Building Language Traditions

Open discussions in classrooms about language lead to traditions that enrich classroom life. Examples of such traditions provide insight into language study traditions and critical-moment teaching.

We Do Not Tolerate Nonsense

Sr. Marianne Philips helped her fifth-grade students, during discussions about their reading, consider a principle that became a class slogan they then placed on posters around the classroom. The posters read: We do not tolerate nonsense. Sr. Marianne often taught children who were reading material they did not understand, and they seemed to believe that once they started reading, they needed to continue reading until they were finished. Whenever this happened, she took the time to explore with her class their options when they did not like or understand what they were reading. The children brainstormed a list of strategies they could use whenever what they read seemed to be nonsense:

1. If the material is interesting or important, keep reading. If things become clearer and make more sense, finish reading and then reread the problem section.

2. If the material is fiction and we want to read it, ask someone to buddy read it with us.

3. If the material is nonfiction and we want to know the information, ask someone knowledgeable about the subject to read it with us. Or ask someone knowledgeable to discuss the subject first and then try reading it.

4. If the material is necessary for a report or other schoolwork, ask the librarian for easier-to-read material that has the same information.

5. If none of the above works out, close the book and find something else to read.

Sr. Marianne wanted her students to know they had both the right to read and the power not to read. In other words, knowing
when to terminate their reading is an important reading strategy (K. Goodman, 1996). The students came to understand that they needed to be honest with themselves about whether they comprehended the reading, and so they decided never to tolerate nonsense in what they were reading. This approach became a tradition in this classroom, and Sr. Marianne has introduced this language tradition in subsequent classes. She always waits for the issue to arise in class, when she can discuss it in response to a critical moment, and each class develops its own list. Occasionally she shows them a previous class list and asks the students if they agree or disagree with the statements; then they write their own.

In one class, however, this language tradition caused Sr. Marianne some consternation. One day when the students were taking the California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS), she was roaming the classroom to make sure the children were comfortable. She noticed that Ruben was sitting quietly with no test booklet in front of him. She quietly went up to him and asked, “May I be of some help?”

“No, sister,” he replied. “I looked the test over and I decided it was nonsense, so I put it away.” Sr. Marianne was respectful of Ruben’s decision and didn’t press him to take the test. “Fortunately,” she said, “none of the other kids thought of that.” Sr. Marianne told me that she often told that story to subsequent students and asked them what they would have done in the same situation if they had been either Ruben or her.

Asking open-ended questions during students’ retellings or responses to literature helps students discover what they know and, even more important, to know “when and what [they] don’t know.” Eleanor Duckworth (1987) writes about the power of “not knowing”:

The virtues involved in not knowing are the ones that really count in the long run. What you do about what you don’t know is, in the final analysis, what determines what you will ultimately know. . . . Accepting surprise, puzzlement, excitement, patience, caution, honest attempts, and wrong outcomes as legitimate and important elements of learning easily leads to their further development. . . .

It would make a significant difference to the cause of intelli-
Helping students be comfortable with what they know and discover ways to respond to what they do not know are important aspects of learning, and can often be supported through critical-moment teaching.

As students reflect on their own responses, they have ample opportunity to critique the truth of what they are learning, explore the uniqueness of their language use, and legitimize their unique interpretations. They wonder about aspects that don’t fit their prior knowledge and realize there are things they don’t know. From this position, they discuss a range of language issues such as parts of speech, use of punctuation, genre variations, and pragmatic considerations for conventional language use. Helping students understand that it is legitimate not to know and discussing what to do in such cases is an important classroom tradition to establish.

My Powerful Language

Another example of a language tradition comes from my middle school teaching. We often started the day with a discussion of the current events students were most interested in from the newspaper, magazines, television, or radio. Sometimes the student presenting the current event would use language that other students weren’t familiar with and questioned. I suggested that students write such words and phrases on the board and share with the class how they are used and what they mean. We then left the words and phrases on the board for a while, and other students would listen for them and add their definitions and the diverse contexts in which they were found. After we explored a number of specific words and phrases, I asked the class to decide whether they would like to keep a class language power book. Keeping such a book became a tradition in my class. We began to follow this procedure with any unfamiliar words and phrases the kids heard, read, or tried to use in their writing or speaking that intrigued or interested them. Usually we included the entire sentence, with
the target word or phrase written in colored chalk. (Adolescents love to use colored chalk.)

One of my students began to keep her own personalized list in a notebook she labeled MY LANGUAGE POWER BOOK. I invited other students to do the same and incorporated this tradition in my other classes. An extension of this practice led to students writing their own dictionaries. We spent a few minutes once or twice a week discussing new language in their language power books. This was also a way to show my students that language is expanding and changing all the time. Some students asked questions about vocabulary meanings, dictionary organization, and other related topics, and these issues often expanded into strategy lessons or theme cycles.

Flora Ann Simon, a first-grade teacher, encourages her students to add new and interesting vocabulary to their individual dictionaries that are purchased by the district for each child as expendable materials. This helps students realize that dictionaries are always being added to and deleted from and that the process of using and producing dictionaries is dynamic rather than prescriptive.

Other language traditions that emerge from critical-moment teaching include class book clubs, choice activity times, author’s chair, reading circles, weekly author teas, and organizing the class with students in leadership roles. Language traditions emerge from student interest and are sustained by student enthusiasm. I recently saw a middle school Teen Topics bulletin board that was developed and maintained by the seventh graders. They not only used charts and other graphics to depict the latest in video games, computer concerns, and their favorite rock music and sports figures, but they also collected a list of teen language they wondered about.

Many critical moments occur when the ongoing curriculum is not easily interrupted. I recently visited a fourth-grade class that reserved a section of the bulletin board for a chart labeled “Ideas To Come Back To.” The teacher and her students used this chart to remember powerful ideas they wanted to think about and discuss at a later time. Such revisiting is important for recursive thinking and becomes a language tradition in the classroom.
Schoolwide Language Traditions

School administrators also establish schoolwide language traditions that lend themselves to critical-moment teaching. Some principals set up weekly lunches in order to read to a small group of students or to have student authors read to them (Harwayne, 2001). A schoolwide post office, a store run by students for selling school supplies, or a school newspaper, radio, or TV station are all examples of schoolwide language traditions. Robert Wortman, principal of a primary school, often asks students who are sent to him because of discipline problems to write their perceptions of what took place (Wortman & Matlin, 1995). It becomes obvious to everyone involved that each student has a different perspective on the same incident. Dr. Wortman discusses with the students why such differences of interpretation occur and the way language is involved in establishing and changing perspectives.

Documenting Critical-Moment Teaching

Every time a critical teaching moment involving language becomes the focus of discussion, students add to their schema about how language works and how to use language. Students become comfortable with tentative responses: the sense that questions are rarely simple to answer, that answers lead to new questions, and that learning is continuous and expansive. They learn that they are capable of revisiting ideas later and that they learn more in-depth over time. Unfortunately, we have not legitimized such critical moments to the degree we should have in professional education. These moments are not easy to document, and therefore even teachers who are aware of their significance don’t always value them sufficiently. With the reporting of teacher research and collaborative university-school research to ever-wider audiences, however, the significance of these moments is becoming abundantly clear (Atwell, 1987, 1998; Bird, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1994). It is important to discuss such moments in professional communities, to help describe them, and to legitimize their use as powerful teaching episodes. These moments
emerge from a teacher’s response to students’ experiences as they eagerly solve problems and answer the questions they pose for themselves and others in the classroom.

We know that students’ spontaneous questions and comments about language often result in language stories and literacy lessons. Such spontaneous interactions become learning opportunities for teachers and students alike. The teacher becomes a learner as the students’ language stories provide lessons about students’ learning that allow the teacher to plan for additional instructional experiences. Language stories, whether they provide lessons about teaching or insights into what students know about language, are “life vignettes that accent some important aspects of language and language learning and therefore help us understand how language works” (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984, p. xv).

From such language stories all educators learn teaching lessons that legitimize the ways teachers respond to thought-provoking spontaneous moments that lead to significant student learning. Teachers and teacher education students should document such moments by keeping anecdotal records or field notes and transcribing video- or audiotapes of the language stories that provide evidence of students’ knowledge and development. This documentation will help authenticate the results of teacher support of such development. These observations provide rich cases for teachers to reflect on for their own development.

The more the education profession finds ways to document and disseminate information about these critical moments and their impact and to situate them in the legitimate context of the overall curriculum, the more likely it is they will continue to be the focus of research about teaching; as a result, we may better understand and combat comments such as, “That’s the art of teaching and we just can’t explain how it happens,” or “There are things about great teaching that just can’t be learned. You have to be born a great teacher.” Critical-moment teaching accentuates the curriculum and legitimizes the uniqueness of each professional in the classroom. There is no set curriculum or curriculum script when the teacher is responding to the authentic questions and concerns raised by their students in the classroom.
Critical-Moment Teaching

To help parents understand the power of spontaneous professional response to students in the classroom, and as a way of documenting for parents and administrators how involved students are in understanding and studying language, teachers often include vignettes of critical-moment teaching in newsletters sent to parents. Some teachers write articles for local newspapers or newsletters to document for the larger public the sophisticated ways in which teachers support students in their explorations of grammar, spelling, phonics, vocabulary, and many other aspects of language study.

But most of all, presenting on teachable moments individually or in collaboration with other teachers or with students at professional conferences and in professional books and journals contributes knowledge about innovative practices to the profession. I urge teachers to document significant critical teaching moments by creating language stories, cartoons, or diagrams for professional newsletters or journals. Such writing provides presenting opportunities for teachers as authors or speakers at the same time that it provides opportunities for perceiving and ideating for those teachers who are listening to or reading the work of their colleagues. These moments are the essence of teaching. As we expose them to others and explore and analyze the ways they work, we come to new scientific understandings of the art and science of teaching.

As I end this chapter, I want to emphasize again that the purpose of the chapter divisions in this book is to recognize the many ways in which language study is embedded in the ongoing language curriculum. The divisions do not suggest that the teaching/learning experiences and opportunities are separable or that any one necessarily occurs before the others. On the contrary, the ideas presented in each chapter are easily integrated into the others; they grow into and out of each other.