

# INVESTIGATING LANGUAGE

## 5

Language is a powerful tool. It allows us to reflect on our experiences; think, talk and write about things we have not experienced directly, make meaning; and share it with others (Vacca & Rasinsky, 1992). In her classic autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, Helen Keller describes the power of language to bring meaning into her life.

*We walked down the path to the well house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word for water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motion of her fingers. Suddenly, I felt a misty consciousness of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that “w-a-t-e-r” meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, set it free! (p. 21)*

We believe that the study of language in classrooms can bring this kind of joy and meaning into students' lives if it is authentic and relevant to them. Further, we are persuaded by the theoretical contributions of

Vygotsky (1986) and the work of researchers like Pelligrini & Galda (1998) that effective language instruction is child-centered and responsive to students' experiences and levels of growth and development. Unfortunately, when researchers (e.g., Andrews, 1995; Applebee, 1984, 1993, 1996) study the nature of language instruction in the schools, too many students, past and present, report unpleasant experiences of high school language study that required them to spend most of their time completing tedious worksheets focused on isolated skills practice. Yet, these same students describe and demonstrate, when given a chance, a sophisticated awareness and love of language in less formal and non-skills oriented settings. Their language is richly colorful and filled with varied figures of speech. Stories they tell reflect intricate visual images; poetry they create in the form of rap and song lyrics reflects issues of greatest concern to them with surprising accuracy.

Students' facility with language starts long before they enter school. The human ability to learn, speak and understand language has been described as a miracle, and is reflected in the fact that even a three-year old can be described as a "grammatical genius [whose] knowledge of grammar is more sophisticated than the thickest style manual" (Pinker, 1995, p.19). By the time they enter school, they have mastered the sounds and syntactic structure of the language they have been exposed to, and can use it to satisfy a range of needs. And as they move through elementary and secondary school they gain greater control of the sound and grammar systems and demonstrate growing competence in situation-appropriate language use (Pappas, Kiefer & Levstik, 1999). Still, students, at each level, can benefit from knowledgeable and observant teachers who challenge and guide students to deepen their understanding of how language works through observation, exploration and thoughtful practice.

Because students are much more competent users of language than we usually give them credit for, and from what we have learned from key research and informed practice (e.g., Weaver, 1996; Pelligrini & Galda, 1998; Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992), we suggest that prescriptive and primarily skill-based approaches do not create an appreciation of language and its uses to improve literacy. Students will benefit from a pupil-centered investigation of how language works. This approach can facilitate the development of a joyful appreciation of language, and enhance students' ability to use language to communicate and learn effectively. The suggestions for language study offered in this chapter are based on assumptions articulated by Andrews (1995)

who argued that classroom language study is likely to be successful when:

- ▶ **Students engage in authentic, relevant, student-centered and contextualized experiences;**
- ▶ **Students have many opportunities to observe authentic language uses, then formulate generalizations based on the observations; and**
- ▶ **Students understand that the standard for acceptable language is floating rather than static and depends on the context in which it is used.**

Our review of research and best practice leads us to suggest that productive areas of classroom language study include opportunities to ❶ understand the nature of language (Language Definitions and Functions); ❷ manipulate and think about the symbols of language (Word Play); ❸ appreciate the role of speaking and listening in literacy development and learning (Oral Communication); ❹ explore the history of the development of the English language (The Changing Face of English); ❺ and investigate cultural influences on language use (Language Variation and the Issue of Appropriateness).

## **LANGUAGE DEFINITIONS AND FUNCTIONS: CLASSROOM INVESTIGATIONS**

Language study can be shaped by a broad definition of language and its functions. Language has been defined as “a symbolic system based on syntactic, semantic, and phonetic features that allows mutually intelligible communication within a group of speakers” (Gleason, 1997, p. 479). In addition, linguists have described language as a process that is human, symbolic, arbitrary, systematic, dynamic, and sufficiently complete to meet

the needs of its users; they also agree that it occurs in varieties.

An early and important lesson that students learn is to determine what meaning the symbols of their language represent. Signs and symbols in their environment indicate, among other things, that they will be fed (at the place of the golden arches or the giant ice cream cone), move forward or stop at a corner (the color of the traffic light or the presence of a stop sign), or leave the presence of others (when someone says bye-bye). In school, letters of the alphabet, punctuation, and even spaces between words are symbols that represent specific meanings that students need to understand if they are to become literate and able to learn through literacy. Later, they interpret mathematical, map, and other symbols and realize that these signify specific meanings. Thus, a key element in language investigation is establishing that meaning can be represented with symbols. Classroom strategies that teach this concept include dramatic play and art and music activities (e.g., Soderman, Gregory & O’Neill, 1999).

Other elements of language study are directly related to its characteristics. Young readers and writers learn how sentences work. They note that certain combinations of words are meaningful and others are not. Two examples illustrate the point—“Pass the salad,” and “salad Pass the.” The first example conveys meaning; the second does not. Conventions concerning English syntax, capitalization, and punctuation must be understood to determine that one of the examples is an English language construction we call a sentence and is meaningful and the other is not.

Students can also learn with teacher-guidance that language changes arbitrarily

with the needs of its users and occurs in varieties. These concepts have implications for dialect (social or regional variation of the same language) and register (variation based on context and purpose). Understanding of and tolerance for regional and social dialects that are different from those used in students' local community are more likely to develop when students have opportunities to learn about how English sounds, vocabulary, and grammar have evolved and changed since the language's beginnings.

Another early and important lesson that students learn is to know the uses or functions of language available to them. Halliday (1975) identified seven functions of oral language that others have described and provided illustrations from conversations (e.g., Soderman, Gregory & O'Neill, 1999). Halliday determined that humans use oral language to: satisfy their wants and needs (instrumental), control the behavior of others (regulatory), seek out and clarify information (heuristic), establish and maintain social relationships (interactional), express their personal thoughts and points of view (personal), create imaginary situations (imaginative), and convey information, (informative) (Halliday, 1975; Soderman, Gregory & O'Neill, 1999). In addition, McGee & Richgels (1996) cited in Soderman, Gregory & O'Neill suggest that humans use written language to remind themselves of information they have already acquired; to send that information over time and distance; facilitate communication among individuals who are not directly known to each other; to establish their own identity with others; keep records; and to increase knowledge.

A lesson about language that can be productively investigated by students from elementary through secondary levels is that it is varied. As mentioned above, two key variations of language are dialects and registers. Speakers of the same language but different dialects are likely to be able to communicate with each other on some level even though the sounds, word choices, and grammar vary. Social dialects reflect "the speaker's social class, gender, age, and race" (Hudson, 1980 cited in Warren & McCloskey, 1997, p. 223). However, registers reflect the speaker's or writer's attempt to adjust to the purpose and context of the communication.

## WORD PLAY

Children have been remarkably consistent in their tendency to play with words from generation to generation. Opie & Opie (1959) describe rhymes, riddles, and even jeers and taunts that reflect children's shared facility and fun with out-of-school language. Interestingly, while word play seems to be initiated in places where children gather to play, it seems to depend on language concepts learned in school for its most sophisticated forms. For example, "A 'true' riddle is a composition in which some creature or object is described in an intentionally obscure manner—What gets wet when drying? A towel" (Opie & Opie, 1959, p.74). To solve the riddle the child must know the nature of a riddle and then figure out the obscure clue. Rhyming riddles require even more skill. Word play allows students to experiment with many aspects of language including vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, syntax and ambiguity. Tongue twisters, riddles, puns, puzzles, and poetry writing provide interesting contexts which foster a love of language, creativity, and risk-taking (Weaver, 1996). Also, puns and other forms of word play seem to make students more sensitive to sound, spelling, and meaning (Kopple, 1995). Moffett & Wagner (1992) observed that

*Word play is fun, but...at its best it is also a creative response to experience. When words are the playthings, language power cannot help but increase (p. 299).*

Word play in the classroom can serve two purposes. First, it can lead students to discover the rules and patterns that help them read and spell successfully; secondly, it can help students increase the numbers of words that they can identify and spell

accurately. Word play activities that fit within the context of specific study can provide an authentic and useful experience. We agree with Tchudi (1999) that teachers would be wise to remember that the elements (e.g., spelling, grammar) of word play are just that—elements, and are most appropriately studied within a meaningful context. Riddles, puns and games that highlight key concepts to be learned can enhance students' achievement as well as their enjoyment.

## STRATEGIES FOR INVESTIGATING WORD PLAY

Following are some strategies that can be contextualized to provide students with opportunities to engage in word play.

- ▶ Students generate their personal list of spelling demons and discuss strategies for mastering each word or word type (Tchudi, 1999).
- ▶ Students write and practice tongue twisters with a partner for non-threatening practice in articulation that prepares them to participate in other oral communication activities with added confidence (Golub, 2000).
- ▶ Students write daffy definitions to increase their understanding of multiple meaning and grammatical patterns (Christenbury, 1994).
- ▶ Students look for words (described as powerful prose) that they purposely use in their writing to expand their expressive vocabulary (Stafford & Dunning, 1992).
- ▶ Students use their own words but use the form or structure of another writer (described as copy-change) to expand their framework for organizing ideas as they write (Stafford & Dunning, 1992).

Word play can actively engage students in investigating and celebrating language. It can also

*work against all the fear of and frustration with language that many students apparently feel and... stimulate much more fascination with and joy in language... (Kopple, 1995, p.52).*

## ORAL COMMUNICATION

Oral communication is another essential part of language investigation and awareness in the classroom (Lindfors, 1990; Moffet & Wagner, 1992; Smith, 2001; Zhang & Alex, 1995). Making formal and informal conversation, participating in discussion, asking and answering questions, describing experiences and objects found in the environment, listening to and telling stories, reading and reciting poems (in groups and individually), and participating in various forms of drama are classroom activities that develop the skill and confidence necessary for effective oral communication. Strickland and colleagues (1989) observed that reading and writing, not speaking and listening, are emphasized in classrooms. Unfortunately, this de-emphasis can have unwanted effects. Since speaking and listening activities that require students to be actively engaged diminish as they move through the grades, they have fewer opportunities to work through increasingly difficult problem-solving, symbolic thought and dramatic play activities (Soderman, Gregory & O'Neill, 1999) that could enhance their ability to learn. In addition, students who have limited speech opportunities tend to experience reading and writing difficulties (Moffett & Wagner, 1992). Students' ability to reason effectively may also be affected by the degree to which they are actively engaged in oral communication (Zhang & Alex, 1995). Further, the SCANS Report (2000) observed that schools do not place instructional emphasis on speaking and listening. The Report then concluded that half of all high school graduates did not have sufficient oral communication skills to perform even entry-level job tasks adequately.

Several reasons may account for schools' neglect of oral language activities, especially at the middle and high school levels. One reason is that teachers may feel that they must target their teaching efforts and time on instructional areas for which they are held accountable. Test results have been the primary

basis for demonstrating accountability. Unfortunately, few, if any, districts systematically assess oral communication. Thus, instructional time is given over to reading, mathematics, writing, and other areas that are routinely tested. Yet, some studies suggest that engagement in activities like the oral reading of poetry may actually enhance writing skill and develop students' confidence so that they can participate in discussions in greater comfort (Bianchi, 1996). The test-driven approach to instruction limits students' opportunities to explore and discover things about themselves and their world and eliminates many of the activities that make learning both joyful and productive. A related explanation is that oral language activities are simply too difficult to assess (Moffett & Wagner, 1992). However, current practices, which make use of rubrics and performance-based assessment techniques, make this a weak argument. Finally, teachers may fear that students will be more difficult to manage in student-centered activities where the direction of the talk cannot always be predicted. Experienced teachers have found that when topics addressed are interesting and relevant to students, goals of the activities are clearly understood, and appropriately structured guidance is provided, most oral communication activities are likely to be instructive and satisfying.

## STRATEGIES FOR INVESTIGATING ORAL COMMUNICATION

While there is still much to be learned about teachable and assessable elements of oral communication, experienced teachers and researchers offer many suggestions. Several exemplars follow. One particularly powerful instructional technique that enhances comprehension and critical thinking is

reciprocal teaching (Palinscar & Brown, 1986; Rosenshine & Meister, 1994). The technique involves having the teacher model the role of discussion leader. Students are guided to follow the teacher's lead as they develop skill in predicting, generating questions, and clarifying and summarizing concepts. Reciprocal teaching is a clear example of scaffolding where the teacher guides learners through a learning task using modeling and verbal clues. It is a process that allows students to assume control of their own learning by providing them with structure, a model of what to do, and opportunities for thoughtful practice. They learn when and how to listen and speak as they gain important new concepts.

Moffett & Wagner (1992) argue that small group discussions are also important. They suggest that literature circles are appropriate for all grade levels and are an effective form of discussion, which can give students regular practice in speaking in small groups. Daniels (1994), whose model of literature circles is based on the work of teachers who have had success with this form of small group discussion, offers this overview:

*Literature circles are small temporary discussions by students who have chosen to read the same story, poem, article or book. While reading each group determined a portion of the text (either inside or outside of class), each member prepares to take specific responsibilities in the upcoming discussion, and everyone comes to the group with the notes needed to help perform that job. The circles have regular meetings, with discussion roles rotating in each session. When they finish a book, the circle members plan a way to share highlights of their reading with the wider community; then they trade members with other finishing groups, select more reading*

*and move into a new cycle. Once readers can successfully conduct their own wide-ranging, self-sustaining discussions, formal discussion roles may be dropped (p.13).*

Experienced teachers and researchers have identified many oral language activities that can be included in the communication curriculum.

- ▶ Students investigate communication on the internet by examining characteristics of e-mail messages and chat room talk to compare them with typical oral conversation (Tchudi, 1999).
- ▶ Students practice making conversation by creating television-like talk shows as a strategy for developing skill in areas like staying on the topic, remaining in character, asking and answering questions, and using appropriate turn-taking behavior (Tchudi, 1999).
- ▶ Students describe and/or compare people, objects, voices, pictures, and their environment to develop fluency and to discriminate among phenomena (Stewig & Jett-Simpson, 1995).
- ▶ Students read and interpret orally a range of materials (e.g., stories, poems, plays, speeches, essays) to promote high-level comprehension, fluency, and confidence.
- ▶ Students engage in improvisational drama, performance of texts, and task and topic talk to provide a solid basis for other literacy skills including analyzing texts, discussing meaning, and reading. They would also benefit from oral experiences that are an ongoing part of the oral language curriculum rather than just an occasional major production; these include “reading to a group after being coached, reading in unison, working up a reading with a partner for taping or a live audience, participating in choral reading having voice parts, staging reading, and memorizing and performing a play” (Moffett & Wagner, p. 178).
- ▶ Students view film or videotape of a story without sound and tape their own oral version of the story to be shared with peers or young children for authentic oral language sharing (Stewig & Jett-Simpson, 1995).

## THE CHANGING FACE OF ENGLISH

When students investigate the history of how English came to be spoken and written as it is today, they learn a great deal about the beauty, power, complexity and other characteristics of

language. They also come to appreciate how cultural experiences shape the ways cultural group members express themselves in their various social/regional dialects. Experiences that introduce students to the history can facilitate the development of more realistic attitudes about language varieties spoken by themselves and others. For example, teachers can help them explore the influence of the Christian missionaries as they introduced Latin into the language; they can also explore the periods when scholars considered French and Latin to be more worthy of study than English.

Gadda (1993) points out that one important characteristic of language is that it changes over time. He argues that awareness of these changes will help both teachers and students understand that language change is natural and inevitable, and that the current changes in English speech and writing are not a corruption of a fixed perfect standard. They see that from era to era humans have reflected their changing experiences in the words they use to describe them. For example, Old English was spoken by people whose daily lives involved food-gathering and the use of animals as a major source of nourishment and clothing; thus common words of that era included terms like sheep, dirt, and earth. Further, as Latin and French influenced English, changes in vocabulary content were evident in its development. The words blaspheme, consistory, profane and renaissance are examples of words of Latin and French origin that reflect the influence of religious and intellectual issues. Parallel changes also occurred in the sounds and grammar of the ever-changing English language.

Wolfram (1998) argues that “language history should teach us that language is much more flexible than our attitudes about it” (p.108). Linguists and others who study language and

learning put language change in perspective and suggest that students who are informed about the history and characteristics of language development will understand the importance and the arbitrariness of a shared standard language pattern. In addition, they are likely to appreciate the contributions made by speakers of culture-specific patterns of that language.

Following are some historical highlights that represent concepts students can investigate to enrich their understanding of their language.

## **HIGHLIGHTS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE HISTORY**

### **Old English (450-1150)**

#### **5th and 6th Centuries**

- ▶ Jutes, Saxons and Anglos settle in Britain and bring with them a mixture of West Germanic dialects
- ▶ St. Augustine arrives and converts England to Latin Christianity

#### **8th and 9th Centuries**

- ▶ Vikings invade Britain and add the North Germanic dialect
- ▶ Normans conquer Britain in 1066
- ▶ King Henry IV speaks English as his mother tongue
- ▶ Standard English is dialect of the time: West Saxon, the language used by King Alfred (871-877), the most powerful ruler in Britain, during his reign

### **Middle English (1150-1500)**

- ▶ Five main dialects of English are recognized—Southwestern or Kentish, East Midland, Southwestern, West Midland, Northern.
- ▶ Britain is described as trilingual—early French; used as language of business, Latin as the language of learning, and

dialects of Old English as a language of common people.

- ▶ Dialects of Old English are viewed as having equal status
- ▶ English is strongly influenced by French speaking Normans

### 14th Century

- ▶ This was a major period of language transition.
- ▶ Statute of Pleading passed by Parliament established rule that all court proceedings must be conducted in English.
- ▶ William Caxton set up printing press at Westminster and questions which conventions of the English language should be printed.
- ▶ Standard English of the time involved West Midland (early in the period); a mixture of East Midland, Southeastern and Southwestern as was common in London during Chaucer's time.

## Modern English (1500-present)

### 16th Century

- ▶ Renaissance blooms and scholars do not consider English as worthy of intellectual study.

### 17th Century

- ▶ English scholars push to stabilize the language through the establishment of rules as Britain gained political and economic influence.
- ▶ An authorized version of the King James version of the Bible is published.
- ▶ English language usage spreads first to North America and South Africa, then to India, Australia and New Zealand.

### 18th Century

- ▶ Samuel Johnson publishes his dictionary and establishes the Standard English of the time (the language used by influential people in London).

### American English

- ▶ Language was shaped by the pattern of settlement of the various immigrant groups—John Smith settlement at Jamestown, VA in 1607 and the pilgrims at Plymouth (1620-1640) settled east of the Appalachians; immigrants from Ireland and Germany settled west of the

Appalachians and Alleghenies in what is now Pennsylvania and the mid-west (1787-1861); Scandinavians, Slavs, Italians, Czechs, Slovaks, Serbs, Croats settled in Minnesota and upper Mississippi Basin (1865-?).

- ▶ Three regional dialects have emerged—general (mid-west and west), southern (most states south of Pennsylvania and the Ohio River), and New England.
- ▶ Each region has its standard.

## STRATEGIES FOR INVESTIGATING ENGLISH LANGUAGE HISTORY

Teachers can engage the students in a variety of authentic and interesting language investigations related to the history of the development of English.

- ▶ Students examine passages from biblical sources or other classics that might be of interest like the “Prodigal Son” written in Old, Middle, and Modern English to draw conclusions about how the language has changed over time (McWhorter, 2000).
- ▶ Students investigate recent language changes listening to recordings, viewing films, and reading newspapers and magazines from a targeted earlier time to appreciate that language change is ongoing.
- ▶ Students interview senior citizens in their families and their community about popular sayings and phrases that have changed or disappeared in recent years.
- ▶ Students trace the gradual change of meanings over time assigned to words like nice (e.g., Middle English—foolish, shy; Old French—Silly; Obsolete—wanton, coy; Currently—pleasing to senses, well-mannered).
- ▶ Students investigate the history of

English spelling by exploring reasons for inconsistencies, efforts to regularize it, and reasons for failure to do so (Tchudi, 1999).

## LANGUAGE VARIATION AND THE ISSUE OF APPROPRIATENESS

Language variation study provides students from mid-elementary through high school with an increasing awareness of the nature of language, promotes a respect for diversity, and leads to an understanding of the importance of mastering a standard language pattern (Christian, 1997; Wolfram, 1990). Teachers can effectively assist students when they are clearly aware of their role in guiding these investigations. Pappas, Kiefer & Levstik (1999) warn that if teachers

*are not sensitive to various typical oral language registers or culturally different discourse styles [they] may be confused about the ‘correctness’ of children’s spoken language. They will mistake appropriate children’s language behavior as deficits. [Further], without an understanding of how spoken texts are created and used, teachers will not be able to provide opportunities for children to employ a range of oral language registers in the classroom, nor will they be able to accommodate children’s ‘ways with words,’ the ways that children have learned to participate successfully in conversations in their communities (p.15).*

Language variation as discussed in this chapter involves issues related to dialect difference and register or context-appropriate language. While there are other important areas that teachers can address related to variation in language (for example, second language learning, language acquisition and disability), dialect and register

study and their effect on learning is explored here.

In 1974, the National Council of Teachers of English passed Resolution #74.2 declaring “Students’ Right to Their Own Language.” The Resolution affirmed “the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language...and that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the rights of students to their own language” (Smitherman, 1995, p. 21). More recently, Larson (1996) quoting Delpit (1995) argued in support of encouraging the use of home language in the classroom because it represents important ties with family and community and is closely connected with its users’ self-image.

It is important that students discuss and explore the language variations they observe in and outside the classroom—especially dialect and register differences and stigmatized and non-stigmatized usage. These explorations can help students expand their language repertoire by learning other codes, which can make it easier for them to access the benefits of mainstream American life (Delpit, 1991). The provision of opportunities to master language patterns that could give students options with potential for more social and economic mobility should occur in a non-threatening and authentic context. Teachers can develop and guide discussions and investigations that bring these language issues into the classroom.

An important aspect of language variation is the study of **dialects**. Social and regional dialects can be explored in ways that teach students about the power of language to reflect both similarities and differences among people who speak the same language but different varieties of it. They learn that the varieties often reflect unique cultures that share many common characteristics. For example, each ethnic group experiences some form of marriage and has developed a set of rules about the custom. Often study of social dialects leads to the discovery of similarities and differences that can enrich students’ understanding and appreciation of speakers of a language variation different from their own. Students also benefit from learning that while dialects differ, they do so systematically and meet the needs of those groups who use them. Thus, no dialect is inherently superior or inferior to another. Understanding and acceptance of these concepts can build important ties among groups and pave the way for richer and more satisfying investigations about the language and customs of our increasingly

multi-cultural classrooms that represent the larger society.

Another important subject for classroom study is the issue of context-appropriate language. Described by linguists as **register** (the adjustment of speech to fit a particular audience or situation), its use serves relevant and practical purposes. Scales and Biggs (1983) address the issue of register as language variation by suggesting that students investigate language along a continuum of formality. They argue that informal language is the variety that is used with family and friends where the level of relationships and camaraderie is usually based on shared experiences and routines. The language exchanges among them can be casual, often brief and informal. However, as language exchanges move away from shared experiences among close relations, additional information may be needed for full and complete communication. The exchanges become more formal. For example, when discussing why some people choose to establish a business, the reason shared with a family member may be stated as “money”; if the exchange is made in a business or job setting, the response may be “profit motive”; if discussed within an academic context, the answer could be “primarily for economic benefit” (p. 152).

## STRATEGIES FOR INVESTIGATING LANGUAGE VARIATION

Following are some strategies recommended for addressing aspects of language variation and appropriate use.

- ▶ Students investigate “status markers,” or those usages that are believed to be so stigmatized that they could seriously interfere with students’ social and

economic mobility and access by a) reading and discussing existing survey results that reflect how people react to the various usage patterns and their attitudes about the individuals who use them; b) extending their investigations by interviewing employers in the local community about what constitutes stigmatized usage in the workplace; and, c) discussing what they learned about the role that context plays in determining their language use choices (Hairston, 1981).

- ▶ Students produce and perform a positive rap video based on a text read or some key concepts learned in a specific content area to demonstrate that important concepts can be communicated in various dialects (Dandy, 1991).
- ▶ Students investigate the language use in the community through surveys and oral histories to develop an understanding and appreciation of language variety (Christian, 1997; Hairston, 1981).
- ▶ Students make home and school dictionaries of language to compare and contrast dialect and register differences (Krogness, 1995).
- ▶ Students use song lyrics and rap poetry for translation exercises (Ladson-Billings, 1994).
- ▶ Students discuss with speakers of other varieties of English (e.g., Jamaican, South African) their experiences of communicating with speakers of North American English to create awareness and appreciation of other varieties spoken by individuals from other countries (Tchudi, 1999).
- ▶ Students keep a journal of their own language with particular attention to adjustments they make when they speak with others in different contexts (Tchudi, 1999).
- ▶ Students view videotape, American

Tongues, to note and discuss the similarities and differences in dialects spoken by Americans (Dandy, 1991).

- ▶ Students view *Black on White, The Story of English* (the PBS Series), and Appalshop videotapes of Appalachian speakers and storytellers to extend knowledge about language variety.

## SUMMARY

Authentic, practical, and student-centered language study can empower students to become sophisticated users of language in all contexts that are important to them. Students who are actively engaged in language activities that challenge them to study the history of the language they speak; engage in thoughtful conversation and discussion with language models who gently challenge and guide their learning; play with sounds, words, and structure; and explore the consequences of choices made related to language variation can build on their natural ability to use language in ways that uplift, satisfy and enrich their life experiences. Teachers may want to rethink the use of those approaches to language study that frustrated and alienated students in the past and replace them with those that allow their students to investigate and celebrate the power, complexity and beauty of the language that serves them so well.

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