BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In the winter and spring of 2002, I gathered data for a study designed to examine the possible uses of linguistic approaches to text analysis in reading strategy instruction for second language (L2) learners. I was interested in whether practicing teachers could come to understand certain basic principles that illuminate text structure, whether the information would be helpful to their teaching, and whether my approach to presentation of the subject was successful. Four practicing teachers participated in the study. This chapter reports on a portion of the larger study by examining the responses of the two teachers who exhibited the greatest contrast.

The core of my data comes from 12 hours of study-and-discussion sessions and approximately 10 hours of interviews held with the participants, who were content area middle school teachers working in an urban school in the American southwest—here called Tierra Encantada Middle School—attended by large numbers of language minority (LM) students from Hispanic, Native American, and Vietnamese backgrounds. The teachers also kept journals during the four months of the study and, as I observed them, piloted their emerging understandings of Study Group subject matter in their classrooms. Their lived responses to the information I presented and to their own classroom-based experiences with that information are the material I have used to catch glimpses of their learning processes and of the potential for using what I have come to call Field Model Construction (FMC) to help intermediate English language learners of middle school age become better readers.

FMC (represented schematically in Appendix 1) is a metastrategy designed for use during reading to aid comprehension of expository text. It involves three virtually
simultaneous steps that are first modeled and scaffolded by the teacher, later performed independently by the student:

1. The reader identifies Known information (propositions previously mentioned in the text) and New information (propositions mentioned for the first time in the text);
2. The reader draws a diagram (Field Model) of the relationships between Known and New information;
3. The reader solves any comprehension breakdowns that arise during the act of reading.

Through their own spoken and written texts produced during Study Group sessions, interviews, classroom activity, and journal-writing, a picture emerges of how a group of practicing teachers situated information about linguistics and second language readers and reconstructed it in light of what they already knew about teaching as well as what they wanted to achieve with their students. A shadow picture is created, alongside the first, of the researcher-instructor’s struggle to achieve two sometimes contradictory purposes: helping the teachers understand the Study Group subject matter but leaving them free to work as independently as possible toward the achievement of understanding.

The study participants went through very different learning processes with very different results. Two teachers, "Eve" and "Lizabeth," presented a clear contrast in terms of comfort with the material and speed of learning, in addition to context-related differences such as teaching style and educational background. The researcher's role with the teachers was conditioned by their needs and responses and was therefore very different in these two cases. All three of us, Eve, Lizabeth, and I, changed positioning over the course of the study. In the terms in which I came to see the changes, we began with sets of assumptions, learned principles, collections of facts, understandings, misunderstandings, ways of being, and ways of talking (among other things), then moved through a learning space in which new ideas were examined and recast, resulting in either major or minor adjustments to our points of view. We learned, in other words, but how we did so and what happened to the information presented and discussed during our many conversations was complex and sometimes unanticipated.

The central impetus for my research was direct experience with the phenomenon of LM school failure. Red flags to the problem are disproportionate school dropout rates (Olsen, 1988; Waggoner, 1999), an ever-widening gap between the SAT composite scores of whites and other ethnic groups (Graves & Cooper, 1999), and huge performance differentials across significant populations of whites and ethnic minorities or LMs with respect to standardized measures of reading comprehension (McLaughlin, 1994; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1999; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000; Peregoy & Boyle, 2000).