

Excerpt from the chapter, *Kindergarten: A Window into My Family in Academic Language in Diverse Classrooms: English Language Arts, Grades K–2*

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Classroom Context

This chapter describes a kindergarten classroom using culturally and linguistically responsive formative assessment. The table below provides more specific information about the classroom context.

Grade:	Kindergarten
Languages of Students:	Spanish, English
Teacher Experience:	5 years; Bilingual Crosscultural Language and Academic Development (BCLAD) Certification
School:	Southern CA, urban, 100% free & reduced lunch

The Students

The majority of students at the school, Academia, have Spanish as their first language. By the time they enter kindergarten students generally have a grasp of conversational English due to their participation in the Academia’s preschool program.

The Teacher

The kindergarten teacher whose classroom and practices are described in this chapter is Consuelo Vasquez. Through the process of working with students, she realized early on in her teaching career that having pedagogical and content knowledge was not enough to meet the needs of her students. She believed that an important key to her teaching success was having cultural knowledge. To be effective, including creating a safe place for learning, she knew that she needed to understand the multi-layered challenges her students faced inside and outside of the classroom. To do this, she had to ask herself, who are the students I am serving? What do I know about them that can be clues about

what might hinder them from learning, such as being able to ask questions, share their thinking and communicate their needs?

In this process, she learned that her personal experiences growing up in East L.A. as a first generation Mexican American, and learning English as a second language, all were assisting her to connect with and better understand her students, factors which allowed her to meet her students' learning and developmental needs. These experiences included many sleepless and fearful nights as a girl with helicopters roaming above her house, sirens and lights flashing through her bedroom window and she herself hiding under her blankets. Consuelo was surprised that these events in her life would work to her benefit as a teacher in downtown Los Angeles, enabling her to related to her students.

Consider this . . .

Consuelo works with many teachers from backgrounds different from their students. In order to be an effective team, all teachers share their personal, cultural knowledge with one another to build their collective capacity to meet the students' needs. What are some ways that teachers in your district engage in team building?

Making the School/Home Connection

Consuelo recognized the importance of making connections with families in order to better understand her students. She gained these connections through doing home visits. Consuelo's visits to the homes of the families of her students fostered a sense of trust among the families in her class and also provided Consuelo with more information on the background knowledge that her students bring to school and the classroom. Through these visits, for example,

Consuelo learned that Yaretzi, a 6-year-old student in her class had multiple roles and responsibilities at home, from babysitting her younger siblings while her mother worked late at night to frequently translating for her father, who was a landscaper in Los Angeles. For Consuelo, assessing where Yaretzi was coming from in her home life helped her determine how to assist Yaretzi to transfer those structures into the classroom.

Consuelo concluded that students like Yaretzi, who have many roles and responsibilities helping others at home, could easily apply these skills to the classroom, yet they needed help boosting their self-esteem and self-confidence in order to exchange ideas and work with their peers. Consuelo knew that her students had been taught to observe her passively and learn from her as the only person who they thought could teach them, but Consuelo wanted to empower her students to help each other, to begin assessing their own work, and to participate in making plans for next learning steps.

In building a connection with families, she had learned much about the home life of her students and how at times, these experiences played a role in whether or not they are available for learning and how she might need to adjust her lessons to meet their needs.

The message from many of her parents was that they instill in their children the importance of listening to their teacher and showing respect by not questioning, but instead by only listening. This was based on a belief that the teacher was always in the right. Having Mexican immigrant parents herself, Consuelo knew the importance for students to hold their teacher in high status.

Part of the necessity for Consuelo to build this active learning capacity in her students was that they (and other ELLs) have more knowledge and skills to cover in the same timeframe as other non-ELLs, specifically, learning a new language and new content within the context of that new language. For this reason, Consuelo felt that in her classroom it was imperative to have “all hands on deck” where all participants in the classroom would serve the dual roles of both teachers and learners, i.e., the teacher learns from her students where they are along their learning progressions and responds to this with appropriately leveled instruction and feedback, and the students evaluate their own and others’ work and provide appropriate feedback and support of each other during the learning process.

To facilitate this move, Consuelo provided students with opportunities to hear her think aloud as she conducted lessons. In order for them to develop the metacognitive skills necessary to help monitor their learning, students needed to observe her question her own work, ask her students for feedback, and publicly share a process of learning rather than only sharing a final product.

Consuelo knew that it was important for her students to learn that teachers, just like students, are learning and that making mistakes along the way is part of their learning process. Knowing that one of the many values instilled in her students was to listen and learn from their teacher, Consuelo had to ensure that she recognized this and used it as a foundation from which to expand. In this effort, she began conferencing with her student. In sharing this conferencing structure, students became familiar with the 3-4 questions she would ask. One was, “May I make a suggestion?” Asking them this question instead of simply imparting information was a critical step in giving her students a voice in the classroom decision-making process and in their own learning.

Integrating Language Support into Classroom Discussion

It was also evident to Consuelo that even with this modeling, her students had a hard time discussing the work she made public and for them to feel confident to share with others. She also knew that not having the appropriate language to communicate ideas about work could hold many students back from participating in conversations with one another, especially when they were providing feedback to each other. In order to support students, she provided them with sentence stems to help them engage in conversations for peer

assessment feedback. These sentence stems, which supported their academic language development included the following.

- I'd like to suggest...
- Have you thought about...
- I didn't understand what you meant when you said...
- A strength I see in your work is...
- I notice that...I agree with...I disagree with...
- You could improve this by...

Knowing that her students felt safe and supported by her, Consuelo also decided it was critical to meet with small groups and have them role-play what it was to be a listener and provide feedback, and the role of the person sharing and how to accept feedback. As Consuelo was familiar with their cultural values, she knew that she had to help them recognize that just like teachers are there to help, so are their peers. In providing them opportunities to role-play, it helped in alleviating any anxiety students felt in giving or receiving feedback. Here are some of the guidelines Consuelo gave her students which she posted in the classroom for regular review. Though her students did not have the reading level needed to independently read these guidelines on their own, Consuelo and her class verbally reviewed them regularly, with the students repeating after her, and pointing to each guideline in turn. After a short while, the students could look at the chart and it would trigger their memory of appropriate conferencing behavior.

Working with a Partner	
Looks Like...	Sounds Like...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Turn Towards Partner · Maintaining Eye Contact when Talking · Stay on Task · Sitting Close 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Compliments · 6 Inch Voice · Asking Question · Pleasant Voice

After building this model for safe collaboration with peers, Consuelo encouraged students to publicly share their work with the class, ask each other questions, and build on each other's ideas/ strategies. Without feeling publicly humiliated, students were given the choice to decide when they were ready to share with the entire class. Gradually, after having a few students share, others become excited and interested in making their work

public. Overtime, the use of the academic sentence stems became second nature to the students.

One student, Chiara, had a difficult time in this process, particularly working collaboratively and listening to others. She had had trouble accepting constructive criticism and listening to other people's opinions. Consuelo had to work very closely with her to ensure that she felt that she was being treated fairly. One strategy that Consuelo used to address her social and emotional needs was to have her observe and 'fishbowl' other groups who were working on negotiating in order to make decisions as a group. Consuelo had Chiara tell her what she observed and, at times, helped her name what she was observing, i.e. compromise, negotiation, collaboration, and equity.

This process also expanded Chiara's academic English language production abilities, a factor in itself which made Chiara feel less frustrated. In addition, Consuelo paired Chiara with Jules, a role model to his peers in his ability to be respectful and fair when collaborating with others. Consuelo strategically paired students so that they could learn from one another about appropriate social interactions. She also guided students to establish group norms that would help prevent issues from arising while groups were trying to have efficient, productive discussions, as well as make decisions as a group. Through this one-to-one guidance and modeling of appropriate behavior and language, Chiara and the other students grew remarkably in their ability to understand themselves as well as others in order to integrate successfully into a collaborative group.

The following table provides more detailed information about how Consuelo individualized her instruction for students based on their unique language and social learning needs during conferencing and larger group instruction.

Student Language Levels and Instructional Implications

	<i>Spanish Speaking and Listening Level 1–5*</i>	<i>English Speaking and Listening 1–5</i>	<i>Instructional Implications</i>
Aurelia	3	3	Use prior knowledge of everyday English as a bridge to build academic English Language (e.g., synonyms).
Samuel	3	3	Focus on expanding use of various time order words.
Pablo	4	3	Focus on developing awareness of different ways to express opinions and feelings.
Beto	3	2	Incorporate Spanish into instruction as necessary to transfer language skills into English.
Maritza	3	2	Bring attention to cognates in Spanish and English.
Yaretzi	4	3	Build awareness of ways to describe objects, places, people, and ideas (e.g., use of adjectives and prepositional phrases).
Ameyali	4	3	Identify which parts of sentences describe the “what” and which describe the “action.”
Gael	4	2	Identify differences between Spanish and English grammatical constructions of subjects and objects.
Octavia	3	2	Incorporate Spanish into instruction as necessary to transfer language skills into English.
Sophia	4	3	Use prior knowledge of everyday English as a bridge to build academic English (e.g., synonyms).
Chiara	4	3	Use prior knowledge of everyday English as bridge to build academic English (e.g., synonyms).
Mateo	3	2	Focus on word order in sentence construction.
Bairon	5	4	Focus on sentence structures key in content area texts (e.g., sequencing and cause and effect in social studies).
Natalia	4	3	Focus on constructing word groups (e.g., verb and noun phrases).
Edgar	4	3	Use prior knowledge of everyday English as bridge to build academic English (e.g., synonyms).
Christian	4	4	Focus on sentence structures key in content area texts (e.g., sequencing and cause and effect in social studies).
Delia	4	3	Focus on creating oral descriptions of people including personality and physical features.
Michael	3	3	Use prior knowledge of everyday English as a bridge to build academic English (e.g., synonyms).

* 4 is meeting grade level standards