

# Meaningful Language Interactions for a Descubriendo la Lectura Student

*Maria L. Martinez and Maribel Lopez, Jersey City Public Schools, Jersey City, NJ*

*Editor's note: Mariana is a pseudonym.*

This article presents an account of one first-grade student's oral language and literacy development resulting from her participation in Descubriendo la Lectura (DLL). Contributing to her success in learning to read and write in Spanish were the collaborative efforts of her DLL teacher, her bilingual classroom teacher, and her mother. One of the first concerns of her teachers was her oral language which they supported both at school and at home. The details of her progress in speaking Spanish while receiving support in reading and writing Spanish demonstrate the contribution of oral language development to literacy in a child's first language.

Mariana attended school in a large, urban district that offers a bilingual program for first-grade children. This district supports bilingualism and biliteracy and understands literacy development to be a gradual process grounded in the development of native language proficiencies. The student's native language is viewed as a valuable tool and an important starting place for instruction. Their view parallels Marie Clay's recommendation that: "The least complicated entry into literacy learning is to begin to read and write the language that children already know and speak" (Escamilla, Andrade, Basurto, & Ruiz, 1996, p. 25). Therefore, the district promotes initial literacy in the native language and gradually



*As Mariana began her DLL sessions, her teachers discovered that she was mixing Spanish and English in her conversations with adults. The educational plan put in place for her at the beginning of first grade maximized her opportunity to learn literacy in Spanish and to help her gain grade-level content knowledge.*

introduces literacy in English. Teachers support oral proficiency in Spanish in order to ensure success and acceleration in gaining early literacy processing skills that will eventually assist the learner in gaining proficiency in reading English.

Mariana entered the bilingual first grade at the request of her mother, as she had experienced difficulty with early literacy in kindergarten, an English-only classroom. Mariana's siblings had been successful in the school's bilingual program and her mother opted for this opportunity to give Mariana the best chance for success.

At the very beginning of the year, the school principal convened a meeting and an educational plan was put in place. This individualized plan of action provided opportunities for Mariana to learn literacy in Spanish initially with the support of the DLL intervention.

## Activating Native Language by Promoting Conversation

As Mariana began her DLL sessions, her teachers discovered that she was mixing Spanish and English in her conversations with adults. In Roam-

ing Around the Known sessions, the DLL teacher discovered that Mariana's language patterns were a product of a reversible process caused by lack of native language use. It was common for Mariana to listen and respond with underdeveloped language peppered with some words in English. The DLL teacher reflected on Clay's observation:

The best preparation for literacy learning is learning to talk and having many opportunities to talk. For Spanish-speaking students, learning to talk has meant learning to talk in Spanish, and it makes sense for schools to continue to encourage these children to speak and develop Spanish and to use Spanish as their springboard to literacy. (Escamilla, et al., 1996, p. 26)

The DLL teacher was therefore careful to respond to Mariana in Spanish. She modeled the language Mariana was expected to speak, read, and write.

The DLL teacher created many language opportunities in order to reactivate and extend her native language skills, as recommended by language researchers (Garcia & Cuevas, 1995; Otheguy, Garcia, & Fernandez, 1998; Ramirez, 2003). Walking to and from the DLL lesson, she would engage Mariana in a game in which the teacher started a story and Mariana would complete it. For example, she would say (in Spanish), "There was a girl who wanted to win the race at school. She began to run fast and then faster, so fast that ..." and Mariana would complete the sentence in Spanish. Over time, Mariana's sentences became

longer and reflected her developing sense of story and her creativity. She looked forward to this challenge every day. Towards the end of the program, they reversed roles. Mariana told her teacher stories and the teacher would fill in the final words.

Another technique that the DLL teacher used was to question Mariana on familiar subjects to allow her to express her ideas in Spanish. Some examples of these are as follows:

Teacher: ¿Qué hiciste el fin de semana con tus hermanas? (What did you do with your sisters during the weekend?)

Student: Fuí al Shoprite y compré dulces. (I went to Shoprite and bought candy.)

Teacher: Oh, fuiste al mercado, que bueno. ¿Te gusta el mercado Shoprite? (Oh you went to the Market [hoping she would use that word *mercado*], you like it there?)

Student: Sí me gusta el mercado Shoprite mucho. (Yes, I like Shoprite a lot.)

Teacher: ¿Por qué razón te gusta tanto? (What is the reason you like it so much?)

Student: Por qué es grande y Mami compra cosas que no hay en la bodega. (Because is big and Mom buys things that the grocery store doesn't carry.)

Teacher: A mi también, como tú, me gusta comprar en ese mercado. (Like you, I also like shopping in that market.)

While these oral language activities were helping Mariana, the 30-minute lessons could not provide sufficient opportunities to expand her native language proficiencies. Importantly, the bilingual classroom teacher supported Mariana's new learning through conversation, reading, and interactive writing activities in Spanish. Mariana's mother and older siblings, who all spoke Spanish fluently, also agreed to encourage Mariana's efforts to communicate in Spanish at home. One suggestion for Mariana's mother was to tell Mariana folktales — *los cuentos de antes*. At first, Mariana's mother felt intimidated by the request until the teacher suggested some traditional folktales such as *La Cucarachita Martina y el Ratoncito Perez*, *Juan Bobo*, and *Blancaflor*. Then, Mariana's mother began to share her childhood stories with her daughter.

As her mother tapped into her earliest childhood memories, she shared stories with deep cultural significance. The day following the storytelling, Mariana would retell the story to her teacher.

When Mariana retold the classic tales, she was able to retell the story in an appropriate sequence. For example, she related:

La Cucarachita Martina and Ratoncito Perez got married. Then, she was making rice pudding and poor Ratoncito Perez fell in the pot. At the end, Cucarachita Martina was very sad.

Mariana was creating her stories with a beginning, middle, and end, as she was taught in the classroom.

## Roaming Around the Known Activities to Support Language

During Roaming Around the Known sessions, the DLL teacher recognized that Mariana needed additional support to successfully read published materials. She used a procedure introduced in section 15 of *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals Part Two* (Clay, 2005) for children who know little about stories and storytelling. The teacher's procedure went as follows: On day one, a book was read to Mariana. On day two, the same book was reintroduced for Mariana to read. Books with easy language structures, clear layout, and good illustrations provided additional support for successful orchestration of beginning reading (Clay, 2005).

The DLL teacher also understood that limited ability to tell a story can be supported through nonverbal activities such as drawing and by labeling the drawings collaboratively. Drawing and labeling with the DLL teacher was a part of Roaming Around the Known (see Table 1). Another supportive activity introduced by the DLL teacher was reading stories aloud to Mariana. These

provided her with an accurate model of Spanish and also created opportunities to initiate conversations around printed materials. These opportunities to talk about stories were rich opportunities to extend Mariana's oral language. As Mariana and the teacher wrote compositions together, the teacher masterfully provided the appropriate level of support to allow Mariana to record some sounds. As a result, she was developing phonemic awareness. By the seventh day of Roaming Around the Known, Mariana had reached a milestone in literacy development in which she linked speaking and composing and represented phonemes correctly (see Table 1).

## Writing Journal Provides Snapshot of Development

Mariana's writing journal provides the best evidence of her language development over the series of lessons. Mariana's DLL teacher is trained in bilingual education and second language acquisition, and she sensitively gauged the level of language development on a daily basis. The fluid nature of their verbal exchanges around books during the second phase of her series of lessons

was difficult to document. Thus, the writing journal provides the best way to show changes in Mariana's language development.

Early in the series of lessons, the DLL teacher commented on her lesson record that Mariana was "jumpy and unfocused" during writing. It appeared that recording her stories was difficult and made her feel uneasy and insecure. However, by writing about topics of interest to her with adequate support from her DLL teacher to record her short stories, Mariana developed confidence and became more focused (see Table 2). With precise guidance from her teacher, she learned to use the patterns in her books to tell stories, to monitor her work, and to self-correct. She also learned to say words slowly and write down as many sounds as she could hear while learning about letters, spaces between words, capital letters, and punctuation. She was encouraged to reread her stories and edit as necessary.

As she gained confidence and skills, she demonstrated more success. In phase two, Lessons 12 to 31, Mariana began telling stories that were significant to her and interesting to her teacher. She planned her stories and now had the confidence to record them more independently. At the end of phase two of her lessons, Mariana's DLL teacher simply prompted for a longer story, and Mariana recorded her stories with minimal support from the teacher.

In Lessons 46 through 61, phase three of her series of lessons, Mariana produced two or more sentences of various types. She wrote more-complex sentences and/or she wrote more than one sentence to express more-complex ideas. Her compositions

**Table 1. Record of Roaming Around the Known Activities**

Lesson	Activities for Oral Language Development
1	Conversation, drawing, labeling Conversation mostly in target language — Spanish; Student attempted to communicate in English with limited success
3	Student spoke about story read to her by the teacher
5	Conversation led to composition and story was recorded by teacher
6	Talked, drew, and labeled
7	Composed and recorded known words ( <i>las</i> ) and applied phonological awareness to record <i>F</i> in <i>Flores</i>

**Table 2a. Journal Writing Samples — Phase Two**

Lesson	Reciprocity Between Reading and Writing	Teacher Observations of Writing
12	<i>Yo veo el sol</i> I see the sun	Short sentence, uninteresting topic, may lack confidence, capital letter, no period Sentence composed of subject, verb, and noun clause
14	<i>Mi favorito es el gato</i> The cat is my favorite	Short sentence, capital letter, no period Sentence composed of subject, verb to be, and simple statement
16	<i>Los libros son lindos</i> The books are nice	Simple sentence, appropriate use of article ( <i>los</i> ) and verb tense, capital letter, no period
18	<i>El oso es bonito</i> The bear is pretty	Simple sentence, appropriate use of article ( <i>el</i> ) and verb tense, capital letter, no period
26	<i>Mi baile estaba lindo</i> My dance was very nice	Simple sentence, appropriate use of verb tense, capital letter, no period
27	<i>Soy Mariana y estoy en la escuela</i> I am Mariana and I'm in school	Two simple thoughts joined by and ( <i>y</i> ), appropriate use of article ( <i>la</i> ) and verb tense, capital letter, no period
30	<i>Mamá dijo vamos a dormir</i> Mama said go to sleep	Wrote from a different perspective, simple sentence, book-like, capital letter, no period
31	<i>Yo fui al cine con mi familia</i> I went to the movies with my family	Wrote from a different perspective, simple sentence, book-like, non-native use of <i>yo</i> , capital letter, no period

began to mirror the language used in books. At the end of her lesson series, Mariana had developed “the necessary links in the brain as she learned to engage in literate activities” (Escamilla, et al., 1996, p. 13). Mariana’s DLL teacher had been successful in shifting her level of help to accelerate her learning without producing anxiety or frustration during the writing component of the lesson.

### Let’s View Language as an Asset

Mariana’s series of lessons was successful due to the collaborative

effort of the DLL teacher, the bilingual classroom teacher, and her mother. By implementing DLL in our school district, our educational leaders expanded their commitment to instruction of Spanish-speaking children in their native language. Our district’s dual language program promotes literacy in the native language and gradually introduces literacy in English. Mariana’s success in the dual language program (a Spanish-only program for literacy initially) after an unsuccessful year in the English-only kindergarten classroom validated the school’s course of

action. The intervention prevented a bigger gap from developing. The educational plan put in place for Mariana at the beginning of first grade maximized her opportunity to learn literacy in Spanish and to help her gain grade-level content knowledge.

As displayed in Table 3 showing Mariana’s scores on the Instrumento de Observación, she made significant progress in first grade. She performed on grade level in her reading of Spanish texts both at the end of her DLL lessons and at the end of the school year.

**Table 2b. Journal Writing Samples — Phase Three**

Lesson	Reciprocity Between Reading and Writing	Teacher Observations of Writing
46	<i>Yo pongo la galleta en la mochila, y yo me la como es el almuerzo.</i> I save a cookie in my backpack and I eat it at lunch time.	Told a story of significance to her non-native use of <i>yo</i> . Subject, verb, noun clause
47	<i>Las toallitas se acabaron. Mañana voy a comprar más.</i> The hand wipes are finished. Tomorrow I'll buy more.	Sequence of events with details Subject, verb phrase, additional construction
48	<i>Tenemos un gallo en casa. Yo le doy pan para comer. El canta y dice Ki ki ri ki.</i> We have a rooster at home. I feed it bread. He crows...	Child used a variety of sentences; developed story by using text
49	<i>Mi papá me trae dulces. yo me los como, y le digo "Papá traeme más."</i> My father brings me candy. I eat it and ask him, "Papa bring me more."	Used quotation marks correctly, developed engaging story by using sensory information Subject, verb/verb phrase, object, additional construction
50	<i>Mi mamá hace comidas todos los días. Ella hace sopa de carne y fideos.</i> My mama makes dinner every day. She makes beef and noodle soup.	Wrote about a familiar event with details; spelled <i>hace</i> correctly
53	<i>Me he caído cinco veces en la nieve. Yo voy a caminar despacito.</i> I've slipped on the snow five times. I will walk slowly.	Wrote about event with details; spelled and formed letters correctly; used idiomatic expression— <i>despacito</i>
56	<i>Llegamos a la escuela en autobus. Después, fuimos a la cafetería.</i> We arrived at school by bus. Then, we went to the cafeteria.	Wrote about events in sequence; used technique introduced in the classroom— <i>después</i> —then
60	<i>Mamá tuvo el bebé. Es una niña y se llama Sonia. Se toma toda la leche</i> Mama had a baby. It's a girl and her name is Sonia. She drinks all her milk	Wrote about a significant event; reread; used capital letters; used punctuation most of the time
61	Edited the story from yesterday and added a fourth sentence	Reread; edited; included additional information

Well-prepared bilingual and culturally knowledgeable teachers can ease the dissimilarities between school and home with administrative and home support. Mariana's mother chose an educational option that matched her native language and culture. Many school systems do not regard the home language and cul-

ture as valuable tools for instruction. This attitude leads some students to disconnect their prior knowledge from the content matter taught at school. Mariana's attempts to communicate in English at the beginning of her lesson series alluded to her assumption that her native language and prior cultural experiences were

too different to be relevant to school. However, when teachers invite language learners to link new knowledge to what they have already learned, learning becomes more comprehensive, meaningful, and exciting. An additional link was made between literacy and Mariana's culturally rich oral tradition by her mother who

**Table 3. Results of Instrumento de Observación Fall 2008–Spring 2009**

	Scores					
	Letter ID (61 items)	Concepts About Print (25 items)	Word Test (20 words)	Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words (39 sounds)	Writing Vocabulary	Book Level
Fall	24	5	0	0	1	0
Exit	60	19	19	37	59	16
Spring	60	21	20	38	67	20

shared her childhood stories (*cuentos*). Mariana’s retelling of folktales required for to comprehend the story and convey it in an effective way. Marie Clay wrote:

We now know a great deal about the ways in which the context of language interactions facilitate or constrain the development of language in children. Early intervention programs in Spanish guide children in their development of the universal aspects of literacy and provide a foundation that can later be used to develop literacy in English. (Escamilla, et al., 1996, p. 26)

Mariana’s success in reading, writing, and speaking Spanish are the solid foundations upon which her success in reading, writing, and speaking English will be built. We predict academic success for this learner as she continues to gain literacy skills following her DLL program and bilingual first grade.

**References**

Clay, M. M. (2005). *Literacy lessons designed for individuals part two: Teaching procedures*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Escamilla, K., Andrade, A. M., Basurto, A. G. M., & Ruiz, O. A., with Clay, M. M. (1996). *Instrumento de observación de los logros de la lecto-escritura inicial*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Garcia, O., & Cuevas, M. (1995). *Spanish ability and use among second-generation Nuyoricans*. New York: City College of New York.

Otheguy, R., Garcia, O., & Fernandez, M. (1998). Transferring, switching and modeling in West New York Spanish: An intergenerational study. *International Journal of Second Language Acquisition*, 79, 41–52.

Ramirez, D. B. (2003). *L1 regression in Spanish-English bilinguals. Selected proceedings of the first workshop on Spanish sociolinguistics*. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project.

**About the Authors**



Maria L. Martinez is a Reading Recovery and Descubriendo la Lectura teacher leader at Jersey City Public Schools, Jersey City, NJ. She graduated from Seton Hall University’s Graduate School of Education with a masters degree in bilingual and bicultural education. Born in Puerto Rico, she advocates for quality education of all children especially those who may be at risk of failure due to cultural and language differences.



Maribel Lopez, a native of Cuba, is a currently a Reading Recovery and Descubriendo la Lectura teacher in Jersey City, NJ. She attended elementary and high school in Cuba, and she now advocates on behalf of bilingual students in need of literacy support. She studied bilingual and bicultural education at New Jersey City University.