

## Right or Wrong?: The Classroom as a Site of Compliance

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Mostly, when I talk to G, a third-grade, emerging-level ELL from El Salvador, she looks at me over her glasses and says nothing. She gives me the same look, across the room, when a worksheet is placed in front of her and she needs help. When she does speak, she speaks so quietly I have to tilt my ear almost right next to her head to hear what she is saying. G struggles with math concepts and often doesn't make it through the problems given to her. Once, she completed a problem almost entirely accurately. I was thrilled. The curriculum is focused on students' comprehension of both what they've done to solve the problem and their rationale, so I asked her, in Spanish, why she chose to do what she did. She gave me a look, then erased her work.

I felt, in asking G to explain her work in her first language, that I was encouraging her, giving her an opportunity to show me her knowledge, to exhibit her success. But it's clear that she did not feel that way; she understood my question as a comment on the accuracy of her work—a judgment, and a negative one. G's reaction exhibited the way students become conditioned to perceive many, or most, educational interactions within a dichotomy of correct/incorrect. This is particularly true of our English language learners (ELLs), who spend considerable amounts of time and effort trying to understand if what they've done is “right”—socially, culturally, academically.

G, like other ELLs who have recently immigrated, has been thrown into a wholly unfamiliar schooling system with unique sets of rituals, norms, and expectations. She is not only navigating a new language, but the distinctive values by which American public school classrooms and learning are structured (e.g., individualism, competition), the norms of how we educate and evaluate (e.g., written tests with multiple choice questions), as well as the social rituals present in interactive settings (e.g., the expectation of eye contact). G is constantly assessing the degree to which she has complied with spoken and unspoken expectations. I see this in how she looks at me, mid-action, for affirmation, how her eyes dart around the room, taking note of what other students do—and how she interpreted my question as a judgment. For an ELL like G, heightened attention to right/wrong pervades and orders the educational space, a space both globally ubiquitous and undeniably culturally specific.

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