

This, That, You, and Me: K-3 Classroom Applications of New Linguistic Research

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This article presents activities for use in any language in K-3 multilingual classrooms to promote demonstrative use and facilitate learning their functions through structured interactions and exposure.

This and That about Demonstratives

“This” and “that” are cornerstones of conversation. Classified as demonstratives, they’re used to direct others’ attention in all languages (Diessel, 2006). By saying, “Look at that,” you can guide where your interlocutor (the person you’re talking to) focuses.

Demonstratives vary by language. Some have two, like English (“this” and “that”, which can be made plural). Others have more. Some varieties of Spanish, for instance, can have three (este, ese, and aquel). Some demonstratives change depending on grammatical gender, like Spanish’s masculine “este libro” (this book) and feminine “esta mesa” (this table).

A common misconception is that demonstratives only indicate the distance between the speaker and the object. These activities aim to introduce students to the notion that the location of the interlocutor can also be important, and the extent to which may vary across languages. They are informed by and presented alongside recent research findings on this effect in the Spanish and English spoken in New Mexico as outlined in our article found on page 2.

Why Does This Matter?

Demonstratives are among the first words children learn, and they’re some of the most frequent words used in daily conversation (Diessel, 2006). They’re also very useful; they can substitute for a word you’ve forgotten (e.g. What’s this again?), or a longer phrase (e.g. The tiny green plastic figurine I’m holding is so cool! → This is so cool!). This makes demonstratives an excellent target for both study and practice.

Using demonstratives to effectively direct others’ attention also requires you to understand others’ perspectives – what they can see, what they’re aware of, etc. This takes time to learn. Imagine you sit across from a child, one box in front of each of you, and you ask, “Can you put the toy dog in this box?” While you mean the box in front of you, children under the age of five will interpret “this box” to mean the box in front of them (Clark & Sengul 1978, Chu & Minai, 2018). Especially for young children, reinforcing effective demonstrative use may enhance their communication skills.

Finally, no language’s system of demonstratives is more correct than any other. For example, some varieties of Spanish have three demonstratives (este, ese, aquel), whereas others have two (este, ese), but neither is better. For educators, awareness of demonstratives’ diversity across languages provides opportunities to appreciate and support students of varying backgrounds, including bilingual children.

Classroom Activities

Here we present activities divided into three levels alongside their suggested grade.

Activity: Round-Robin

Level 1: Kindergarten – 1st Grade

Goal: Students learn the difference between referring to items they are holding versus items someone else is holding.

Similar to show and tell, have students bring in an item small enough to hold. This can be a book, water bottle, keychain, stuffed animal, etc. Then, have all the students sit in a large circle with their items. Going around the circle, students will present their items using the prompt: “That is your [A], this is my [B],” where A is the previous student’s object and B is the student’s own object. To demonstrate, you may start the activity by saying, “This is my favorite book.” The student

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next to you then says, “That is your favorite book. This is my green water bottle,” while presenting their water bottle. The student next to them then says, “That is your green water bottle. This is my pink keychain.” This continues until all students have taken a full turn.

It is important not to correct students if they do not exactly follow the prompt (e.g., they may use “this” instead of “that” when naming the previous student’s item). Students are experimenting with how they use language and what they find effective, and variation is normal.

The game is then repeated in a second language. In a Spanish-English dual-language classroom, for example, students would say: “Ese es tu [A], este es mi [B].” The two (or more) languages used can be any you wish to target.

By completing “Round-Robin” twice, students can compare the experience of using each language in a follow-up discussion that analyzes how the demonstratives were used and why. It’s crucial in leading this discussion to help students understand that there is not a correct way to use demonstratives; at this level, discussion should focus on how different demonstratives serve different purposes, and that different languages use different demonstratives for the same purpose.

For a more advanced “Round-Robin”, students can repeat the items of more than just one student. The challenge could instead be to repeat the items of every student before them, or as far back as seems reasonable.

Activity: Ask Me

Level 2: 2nd Grade

Goal: Students learn how demonstratives correlate with the distance between themselves and the items they’re talking about.

Inspired by research that uses the “Ask Me” Task to study bilinguals’ demonstratives (Skilton et al., under review), here we adapt it into a student activity. This activity has a worksheet to be printed for each student, which can be found in the supplemental materials at <https://bilingualism.unm.edu/resources/for-educators.html>.

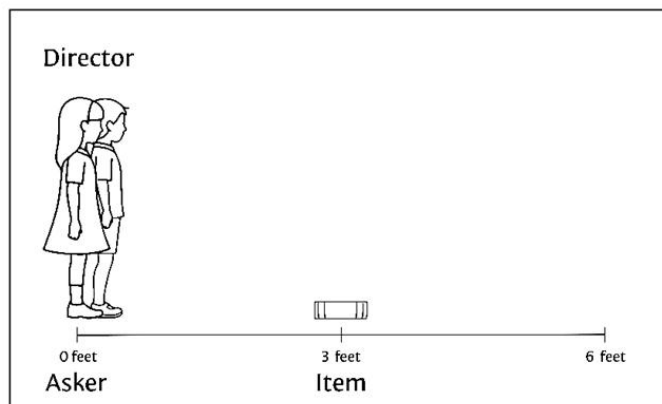


Figure 1 - Example picture of item arrangement for students to recreate from the “Ask Me” Worksheet.

Though each student must complete their own worksheet, the activity is done in pairs. On the worksheet are diagrams with three arrangements of the two students and a hand-held item of their choosing (see Fig. 1 for example).

Together, the pair measures and marks (with tape, pencils, chalk, or otherwise) three locations on the floor, each three feet apart. Then, one student is designated as the Director, and the other is the Asker.

The Director is responsible for placing the item (e.g., a book or water bottle) in the correct place for each diagram. Then, they stand next to the asker at the first marked location and say, “Ask me if the [item] is mine”

The Asker is provided with specific choices for answering this question. In English, they are: “Is this yours?” or “Is that yours?” When the Director says, “Ask me,” they must respond with one of the provided scripts. There are no correct answers; they should say what feels natural.

On the worksheet, the Director writes down which demonstrative the Asker used beneath the diagram. This is done with the item at every location the students marked, then repeated with a different item to elicit a total of six demonstratives. Students then switch roles.

As with “Round-Robin”, students then complete this activity again in a second language. In Spanish, for example, students would be provided three scripts: “¿Este es tuyo?”, “¿Ese es tuyo?”, and “¿Aquel es tuyo?” This does not have to be done

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immediately after the first language, as students may start to find the task repetitive, but can instead be done on a different day.

In a follow-up class discussion, have the students present their demonstrative choices and analyze the distribution of responses (we provide a spreadsheet in the supplementary materials that may also be useful for tracking these). For example, students may compare their responses for each scenario and reflect on questions like: Why did you choose the word you did? Do you think everyone uses that word? Why or why not?

Importantly, this discussion shouldn't privilege any response as more correct. Instead, the exercise should help students discover which demonstratives tend to be used to refer to objects at varying distances and how this may differ across languages and individuals. This will help them consider the complex meanings associated with demonstratives across languages.

Activity: Advanced Ask Me

Level 3: 3rd Grade

Goal: Students learn how their interlocutor's location can also influence which demonstratives they use.

Level 3 is a more advanced version of Level 2. Like Level 2, pairs of students complete a worksheet that can be found in the supplementary materials at <https://bilingualism.unm.edu/resources/for-educators.html>.

This worksheet uses the same three marked locations measured by the students, the same roles of Director and Asker, and the same scripted responses. The difference is that now, in addition to a single item of their choice being moved to different marked locations, the Director also moves (see Fig 2. for example). There are nine different diagrams on the worksheet showing the arrangements.

The repetition of the activity in a second language is particularly important here, as the interlocutor's location may have a more prominent effect in one language.

In the follow-up discussion examining which demonstratives students used, you can prompt students by asking whether they used the same demonstrative every time the item was in the same place, and why or why not? This can help them discover the complexities of demonstrative use within and across languages and how language use is highly variable.

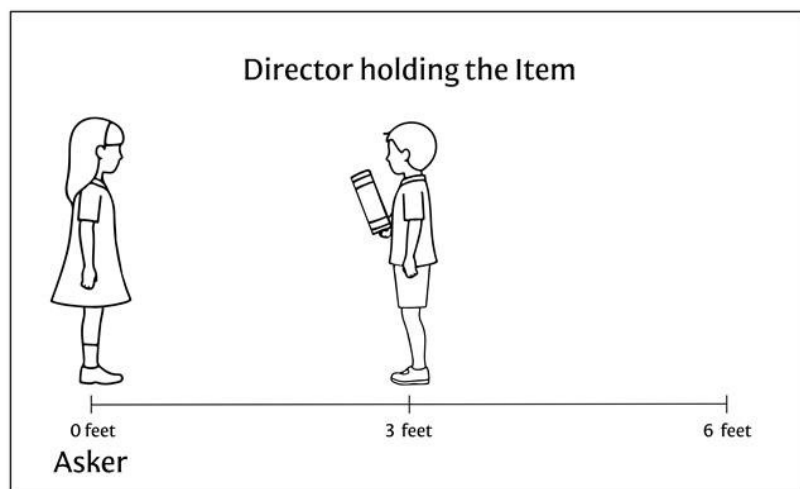


Figure 2 - Example picture of item arrangement for students to recreate from the Advanced "Ask Me" Worksheet.

Takeaways

Demonstratives, words like "this", "that", "este", "ese", and "aquel", are a cornerstone of all languages, and we use them frequently for a variety of functions. As our article, *This, That, and That Near You: New Research on Bilingualism and Demonstratives* on page 2 shows, in some languages, including the English and Spanish spoken in New Mexico, the demonstrative you use can depend not only on how close you are to the object you're talking about, but how close your interlocutor is to it, too.

As such, we present materials to be used in any two (or more) languages in K-3 classrooms to facilitate learning demonstratives' functions and reflect on language variation through structured interactions.

The ideas presented in this article are also flexible. We encourage educators to adapt them as they see fit for their classrooms and to promote diverse language use.