

**Assertion 1: I will promote a safe learning environment to optimize students' willingness to take risks during their acquisition of a second language.** I believe that students require a level of comfort throughout the language learning process. As a Spanish teacher, it is one of my main objectives to foster student growth in my content area by lowering students' affective-filters and increasing their willingness to make errors (Krashen 1981). Adolescents at the high school level are of course increasingly self-conscious, which already impedes on their ability to put themselves out there and make mistakes in front of an entire class of their peers. Therefore, pointing out every error a student makes will only discourage them from participating further.

One way that I am able to optimize students' willingness to take risks in my class is by combating stereotype threat. Claude Steele coined the term stereotype threat, believing that it "is a standard predicament of life... This means that whenever we're in a situation where a bad stereotype about one of our identities could be applied... we know it" (Steele 2010). While Steele explores the ways that stereotype threat generally affects broader identities like race, gender, and sexuality, I have seen students in foreign language classes fear the fulfillment of a stereotype about themselves as individuals. It is possible that they had a bad experience with a teacher or received one bad grade after another—either way, it is enough to send a students' confidence level and belief in their ability down the drain. It is my responsibility to be prepared for any student to come into my class who might have an expectation for failure in foreign language simply because of any assortment of negative past experiences.

I always start the beginning of the year by trying to relate to those students; by making them believe that anyone can learn another language no matter what they thought about their ability before coming into my class. I begin with my own story—that of a white boy growing up

in an upper-middle class suburb in western Massachusetts who had originally hated Spanish class after doing so poorly. After explaining to them that my next teacher had convinced me to shed those preconceived notions about my lack of ability, I invite them to do the same. Students must forget about those identities that they carved out for themselves when they are in Spanish class, because that will only limit them to a fixed mindset (Dweck 2006).

This brings me to the next step in fostering a classroom that promotes a culture of error in order to optimize an environment of student comfort and their willingness to take risks. In doing so along with combating stereotype, I believe it is necessary for students to view their intelligence as something that can increase and grow. This derives from Carol Dweck's research exploring and encouraging the positive effects of adopting a growth mindset, which she defines as "the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts" (Dweck 2006). By promoting a growth mindset toward foreign language learning in class, my students will focus less on themselves having a fixed set of skills and more on how effort can allow them to develop and improve those skills. This connects back to their willingness to make errors. If my students can view errors as an obstacle from which they can learn, then they will be more apt to overcoming those obstacles and succeeding—both in the classroom and in their daily lives.

In fostering this culture of error in my classroom, I am promoting a growth mindset and combating stereotype threat in order to put my students in the best possible position to succeed. It is worth noting that simply acknowledging that errors are not always bad may not convince a high school student. In this sense, it is important in addressing errors that the corrective feedback is done in a way that is forward-looking; in other words, repurposing the error in a way that motivates them to improve rather than dwell. Of course, it is also important to acknowledge that

students making the same, consistent errors without any desire for growth is not going to help their language acquisition (Lyddon 2011). Here I think it is important to understand that some students take a foreign language simply as a requirement and with no real motivation to actually learn a second language. Despite this, by fulfilling the objective for my first assertion, it follows that my students will at the very least have access to a supportive environment that cultivates their personal growth and willingness to take risks.

**Assertion 2: I will create an atmosphere of acceptance for students of any race, culture, or identity.** While I am currently teaching in a predominantly white, affluent community in eastern Massachusetts, I believe my role as a language teacher is vital in promoting a healthy and productive approach to cultural instruction. Many of my students have never experienced prejudice or racism due to having privileged lives; teaching them about other cultures around the world is an excellent segue into doing just that. This includes not only acknowledging different Spanish-speaking cultures in my instruction, but also the diversity within the classroom. It is easy for adolescents of a minority in a mostly white town with all white teachers not to feel supported (Tatum 2003). For example, students in the METCO program that are transported to our school are already at an academic disadvantage due to longer bus rides and fewer resources available to them. Adding a racial or other minority identity into the mix only makes their situation worse.

To address this issue and those similar, I will begin the academic year by explaining to my students that my classroom is a safe space where we must only respect and support our peers. I will also make sure to handle any tension that does occur between students with a calm

demeanor, subsequently addressing it in a manner that allows students to look forward and learn from the experience. Students of a sexual minority or who are transgender or gender nonconforming also face discrimination and bullying in the high school setting, which can lead to lower grades, higher dropout rate, and suicidal thoughts (Sadowski 2008). To foster a space of equity, I also begin the academic year by introducing myself by stating my preferred pronouns (“he, him, his”) so that transgender or gender nonconforming students know that my classroom is a place where they may also let us know theirs.

Similarly, being a teacher who is also part of the LGBTQ community, I choose to be open to my students, which can in turn show them that I am someone they can relate and look up to for support. I also participate in advising the GSA to promote tolerant school culture in addition to my own classroom. In a chapter on LGBTQ youth in his book *Adolescents at School: Perspectives on Youth, Identity, and Education*, Michael Sadowski reports how schools with a GSA are statistically more likely to promote students feeling comfortable enough to be open about their identity (Sadowski 2008). By acknowledging and supporting students of different demographics, I will create an atmosphere that encourages a culture of respect for diversity.

**Assertion 3: I will tie in a focus on diversity with culture and language instruction to inspire my students to become productive and tolerant members of our global community.**

Pairing my objective for Assertion 2 with instruction specific to Spanish-speaking cultures, I will invite students to peek outside the bubble of their own privilege and appreciate the way people live in other parts of the world. Often white, English-speaking students who have lived in one place their entire lives are unaware of the fact that there are people out there that do not live by

the same norms they do. Therefore, if nobody educates them about this other side of humanity, their inevitable contact with people of a different culture may be met with ignorance and confusion. I will explain to my students how it is our duty as future citizens of our global community to be able to coexist and appreciate everyone with whom we share the world. Doing this through instruction in Spanish language and culture is an excellent method—Spanish is the third most spoken language in the world and second in our own country and the latino population in the United States alone is growing at a rapid pace (Oxenham 2016). Either way, they need to be prepared.

While it is surely important to recognize the importance of students developing a global perspective to prepare them for the world, they will not be able to do this if they are not on a pathway to building their own identity. In Carol Dweck’s book on mindset, she maintains that “for children with the growth mindset, success is about stretching themselves” (Dweck 2006). I believe that this pertains to their view of the world as well as their general intelligence. Promoting a growth mindset for my students would challenge them to be more comfortable with the notion of working outside their comfort zone and enhancing their view of the world. It is ultimately about allowing them to understand that they are privileged, and be okay with the fact that that is sometimes unsettling to contemplate; especially for adolescents.

According to Scott Seider in *Character compass : How powerful school culture can point students towards success*, he explains how Roxbury Prep, a school in Boston, used teacher-led advisory to improve students’ “performance character” (Seider 2012). He explains how these teachers “seek to influence performance character” and “provide them with academic and social-emotional support” (Seider 2012). Similar to how teachers at Roxbury Prep build

relationships with their students to promote this type of growth, I will develop an excellent rapport with all of mine. I plan to be a role model and support system for my students that will contribute to their own sense of self—in other words, encouraging them to build on their performance character. Ultimately, it only makes sense that performance character and growth mindset would compliment one another. I believe that in motivating students to understand and appreciate the benefit of those concepts, they will have a better understanding of their own identity as they grow through adolescence and into adulthood. I will treat every lesson as though there is an implicit objective to make sure that my students leave the classroom not just having benefited from the equitable learning environment that I have provided for them; I hope it follows them so that they may become productive and “growth-minded” members of our global community.

## References

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