

Exploring Teacher Language and the Implications for Student Responsibility

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Abstract

This inquiry contains an analysis my language choices when speaking directly to the students in my classroom. I was curious as to if I was using direct requests or language that required my students to problem solve and think critically?

I also examined and investigated how a new teacher can learn to use a less directive approach which will then transfer the responsibility for thinking and acting to the students.

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Background information

Teaching Context

For the past year, I have been working as an intern in a first grade classroom at Radio Park Elementary alongside my mentor, Judi Kur. Radio Park is part of the State College Area School District in State College, Pennsylvania and is located only miles from The Pennsylvania State University. Our classroom is comprised of 22 students—10 girls and 12 boys. Of these 22 students, one student moved to America from Chile at the beginning of the year, and another student moved from Korea in the middle of December. Both students are enrolled in the English as a Second Language program. In addition to these two students, we also have one African-American student and two with mixed ethnicity (Chicano/Anglo; African-American/Anglo).

Rationale

When I first sat down to consider the possibilities for my inquiry project, there were numerous options that ran through my head. But soon after brainstorming, one topic in particular stuck in my mind. I remembered my mid-term evaluation where my mentor and my PDA sat with me and we discussed my progress up until that point of the year. One thing that was discussed, and later set as a goal, was for me to try using a different form of language within the classroom. Together, we set the following goal: “ To systematically observe ways in which [my] mentor uses questioning to improve instruction and manage behavior.” This particular goal was interesting to me, and I immediately began to implement changes in my language to address this

goal. I made a conscious effort during my lessons, transitions, and small group instruction to use this form of language. After that initial evaluation, I pondered why and how this language should be used in the classroom. Would using a less direct approach and instead using questioning benefit my students?

This thought has stayed with me and as I considered my options for my inquiry, I was driven by my eagerness to create an environment where students are able to learn and grow as individuals. As I began to pay more attention to the language I was using, I realized that it might be having a profound affect on my teaching. Through a questioning style of language, I was requiring that my students become problem solvers, along with my help. I was also creating an atmosphere that was independent. In regards to my own teaching, I noticed an improvement in my own attitude, because I did not feel as though I was “bossing” my students around. Instead, I was working alongside them. My teaching style has changed, and, in my opinion, in a good way. Prior to this opportunity, I would have gone about teaching using direct instructions such as “Don’t do that!”, “Sit down”, and “Clean that up now”. However, that frame of mind has changed. I also believed that through this inquiry I would learn a great deal about myself as a teacher and how I could reach the students in my class. In addition to those benefits, I was looking at something that I would be able to alter and/or change and improve with each new year. It is something that I could use and apply in any district, with any students. My goal as a teacher is to provide the most conducive learning environment, and part of that environment is the language that I use within the classroom throughout the day.

Research

Why should we take into consideration the words or the language that they use with students in the classroom? In Ruth Charney's (2002) book *Teaching Children to Care* she states, "Our words make a difference. We need to be clear in communicating what we expect, and we need to honor our words by doing what we say we will do. If we use language precisely and honestly, we can expect the same from our students" (p. 245). While researching language and its affects on children, I came across a great deal of information that supported the particular topic I was investigating. While first examining the topic and myself and then discussing it with others, I came to the realization that the reason I was unconsciously using a language that was direct with the children was because that was the type of language I had been exposed to while I was in school. While reading *How To Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk*, I came across a statement by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish (1980) that summed up to me why I should investigate the language that I use with children. The authors believe we should, "put an end to talk that wounds the spirit, and search out the language that nourishes self-esteem" (p. 88). As teachers, we have the opportunity each day to encourage, excite, and educate the students who walk into our classroom. Prior to this inquiry, I had not considered my language as a factor in accomplishing the above-mentioned goals. As Ruth Charney (2005) states in a column found online, "it is so easy to take our words for granted and forget that they are a powerful tool; a way that we "encourage" and "empower" children's best efforts to take care of themselves, one another, and their environment" (¶ 2).

Through my research, I have discovered that language has a profound impact on children.

There are numerous characteristics of encouraging and empowering language, which Charney (2005) also describes:

- Be specific and direct. (We will start when I see everyone's eyes on Jason.)
- Speak to the child (or children) rather than about the child(ren). (Leila, I noticed you stayed in your seat while I talked to Derek. Thanks for your cooperation.)
- Stress the deed not the doer. Describe actions and deeds rather than making judgments. (I notice a lot of paper on the floor. We can't leave the room until it is clean.)
- Give children the opportunity to follow through with appropriate behavior. (Show me how you can say that with your friendly words.)

(¶ 5)

My experiences in the classroom tell me that Charney is absolutely correct. My belief is that by using a less direct language and instead using a questioning approach, students will become individuals who are responsible and are able to problem solve. Faber and Mazlish (1995) state:

If there's one thing we can guarantee all of our children, now and in the future, it's problems - sometimes one right after the other. But by teaching them how to break it down into manageable parts, by encouraging them to use their own ingenuity to resolve their problems, we are giving them skills they can depend upon

for the rest of their lives. (p. 148)

It became evident to me while researching this topic that language does indeed have an impact on the students within a class. Through this experience, I have been able to analyze the language that I use now in comparison to what I used in the beginning of the year. As Faber and Mazlish (1995) state, “When we invite a child to join us in tackling a problem, we send a powerful set of messages...” (p. 148).

Wonderings

My inquiry is centered on the wondering:

- How does a new teacher learn to use a less directive approach which will then transfer the responsibility for thinking and acting to the students?

From this central wondering, the following sub-wonderings emerged:

- Why do I use this direct approach?
- Why do I revert to more direct language during transitions and times when I feel the class is more chaotic?
- Will I be able to change this language and will it impact students?

Inquiry plan

Procedures

There were four distinct parts that supported my inquiry plan. Each of the four parts played a vital role in helping me to answer my wondering “How does a new teacher learn to use a less directive approach which will then transfer the responsibility for thinking and acting to the students?” I first researched the topic of language and empowering language in order to understand what the experts say about the different forms of language used in the classroom. In addition to research, I used personal reflections as an opportunity to think deeply about my language and attitude during various parts of the school day. I also conducted a class meeting in hopes of understanding how the language that I use within my own classroom affects the atmosphere and the students. Lastly, I analyzed video recordings and voice recordings of my lessons and also my interactions with students to hear the language I was using.

Data Collection

1. *Research*: I began this inquiry project by researching the topic of empowering language in the classroom. The research that I found was helpful in confirming the positive affects of using empowering language when speaking to children within the classroom. The evidence for my claims will be centered around these resources.
2. *Personal reflections*: After particular occurrences and also at the end of each week, I would write reflection journals on the events that

transpired and how I felt during the event. I also reflected on the language that I used in order to see if there was a pattern in the language that I used and the situation I was presented. Various quotes and statements from several reflection journals are included to support my claims. The entire journal can be found in the appendix.

3. *Class meeting*: In order to best understand the affects of teacher language on students, I held a class meeting to discover how my students feel about the language that I use within our classroom. A lesson plan was developed and implemented during an afternoon in my classroom. (Appendix A)
4. *Voice Recordings/Video Recordings*: In order to fully understand the language I use within the classroom, I carried around an iPod to record my interaction(s) with the students in my classroom. I was able to easily hit record throughout the day if I felt there was a time where my language would be especially beneficial to analyze. I also watched and analyzed recordings of a few of the lessons that I have taught since beginning this journey of inquiry. Several of these recordings were transcribed and have been included in the evidence section of this paper.

Data Analysis

1. *Research:* As I conducted research, I was looking for information regarding empowering language and language used within the classroom and its affects on students. The information I was searching for was rather easy to uncover due to the vast amount of information and books addressing the language that is used with children, both at home and at school, and the implications it has on children. I used a great deal of my research to support my claims as to why it is important to consider the language we use in the classroom. I also used the research in order to understand how I could effectively change the language I use to improve and enhance my current classroom and the future classroom(s) I will work in.
2. *Personal reflection:* Since beginning my inquiry, I began reflecting weekly on the events that had transpired that week and how I felt in regards to the language that I used. I also used it as a way to reflect on my attempts to accomplish the goal that I had set early in the year with my mentor and PDA. These reflections also served as a wonderful tool when I considered my language in regards to my attitude. Through these reflections, I was able to express my feelings and emotions over a period of time.
3. *Class meeting:* In order to understand how the language used within a classroom affects and impacts the children within the room, I chose to hold a class meeting. Through this class meeting, I was able to ask students to demonstrate different types of voices (happy, sad, mean,

bossy, etc.) while at the same time asking them how they feel when a teacher speaks to them in these various languages. What I discovered while speaking with my students, was that they do understand what a bossy voice is and how it sounds. But, what I wanted to pull from them more was their feelings when spoken to in such a way. A transcribed portion of this discussion is included as evidence.

4. *Voice recordings/Video Recordings:* At the end of each day, I would upload and import the voice recordings or videos onto my laptop. While watching them or listening to them, I would record the date, setting, number of students present, and situation. After completing this information, I transcribed the dialogue that occurred between the student(s) and myself. I also took notes about the actions that occurred between the student(s) and myself. I then compared the notes in order to see if there was a pattern in the setting or situation that caused me to use a more direct approach. Various interactions between students and myself were transcribed and are included as evidence to support my claims.

What I Learned

Through this inquiry I was able to learn a great deal about my teaching style and my beliefs as a teacher. Since the conclusion of my first evaluation, I have made a conscious effort to watch the language that I use within the classroom. Through research, observations, surveys, and interviews, I have recorded numerous benefits supporting a less direct approach when working with children and how it affects the children as a result. As a new teacher, it was my responsibility through this inquiry to learn how to use a less directive approach when speaking with the students in my class. After completing this inquiry, I now have a better understanding of how I can transfer responsibility to the students through the language that I use. The claims I believe I can make supporting the use of this form of language are as follows.

Claim #1: I believe I began the year using directives because that is the model I have most often observed as a student.

Evidence:

As I began thinking about the data I had collected, I started to ponder why I felt the need to be so direct with my students. I wasn't aware that I was being so direct in the beginning of the year, but it was brought to my attention during my first evaluation. After my initial evaluation, I made a conscious effort to alter the way in which I spoke to the students in my class. After discussing this goal with my mentor, I realized that altering the language that I use within the classroom could have a profound and positive effect on the students. By always giving students direct instructions, I was not giving them

the opportunity to solve their own problems or allowing them to think for themselves. In the text Raising Self-Reliant Children In A Self-Indulgent World (1989) authors H. Stephen Glenn and Jane Nelsen provide a wonderful example of the negative affects of direct language. Glenn and Nelsen (1989) state:

It is much easier to step in and direct children to do things our way than to invite their participation and accept that they might do things differently. Human beings are basically very independent creatures who demand a certain level of respect for their uniqueness. When we are too quick to step in and direct, we produce hostility, aggression, and resistance. (p. 80)

This particular statement struck me when I began investigating this topic. I had never before considered the negative impact that using direct language could have on students. I realized by looking at my journals, and reviewing my PDA observations and evaluation that I was not conscious of what I was doing and had been conditioned to use this form of language due to the language I had been exposed to in my education career. While I must admit that not every teacher I had while I was in elementary school or secondary school used this form of language, most did. I didn't realize at the time how limiting this form of language was on me as a learner. Unfortunately, I continued using this form of language early in my career as a teacher. Thankfully, through this inquiry, I have been able to address this and I have worked to correct it. As Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish state in the book How To Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk (1980):

We want to break the cycle of unhelpful talk that has been handed down from generation to generation, and pass on a different legacy to our children - a way of communicating that they can use for the rest of their lives, with their friends, their co-workers, their parents, their mates, and one day with children of their own. (p. 233)

Claim #2: *I now know that I do not have to control every second. During transition times and committee work, I can trust students to complete the task.*

Evidence:

Although I have been working at improving my language in the classroom since early in the year, there is still a time of day when I revert back to the language I am familiar with, a direct and “bossy” language. During transition times or at the end of the day, I begin to feel flustered and rushed to complete the tasks before me, so I begin demanding certain actions from the students. In the following journal reflection, I describe an instance from this past winter in which I reverted to this language.

While the students were completing their committee work, I glanced to the clock and noticed that we were running behind schedule and the students still had tasks to complete. As I looked around the room, I spotted coats still hanging on the hooks, backpacks in the buckets, and gloves and hats strewn across the floor. Instead of allowing the students to be responsible for their

own belongings, I quickly grabbed up the items, raised my voice, and began asking ‘Who do these belong to?’ At this moment, every student stated ‘It’s not mine!’ which frustrated me even more because I wasn’t asking who it didn’t belong to rather who it did belong to. Witnessing this, my mentor simply said to me ‘Don’t worry, we won’t be late. Just let them find it themselves.’ At that very moment, I stepped back and took a deep breath. While I was still worked up over the thought of being late, the students were able to complete their tasks, claim their items, and leave for the bus on time. (March 23, 2006)

Through this journal reflection, I was able to express how frustrated I felt in the moment because I was panicked and worried that we would be late for dismissal, but I also learned by reviewing it that I can trust students to act appropriately and the world will not end even if I do not revert to directive “bossy” language.

About a month and a half later, during which time I was working hard at incorporating a less direct language, I reflected on an instance in which I took a step back, watched the students, and witnessed that they were indeed able to complete the task on hand without my constant harping.

With this being my first day back from Spain, I was extremely exhausted by the end of the day. When I would normally be following the students around at the end of the day during committee work ensuring they would complete their job, I found myself sitting back and observing. While I had not planned to go

about it this way, I was wiped out from a full day in school after having returned from a weeklong stay in Spain. This provided me with a wonderful learning opportunity. I did not have the energy to follow the students around, so I sat back and watched as they did their committee work. And, I must admit, to my surprise they were successful in the task(s) before them. (March 13, 2006)

Although it was not intentional, this event and reflection provided me with the opportunity to realize that I do not have to control every second of the day, especially during committee work.

***Claim #3:** A new teacher can learn how to use a less directive approach and effectively implement it in within the classroom.*

Evidence:

There is a great deal to learn as a new teacher, and through this experience I was able to examine my language and how it affects the students with whom I am currently working. I was unsure of where to start or even how to start. But, while reading Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish's How to Talk So Kids Can Learn At Home and In School (1995) I came across a series of steps to follow. Faber and Mazlish (1995) state the following steps to use when adapting your language for the classroom:

- Listen to my students' feelings and needs.
- Summarize their point of view.
- Express my feelings and needs.
- Invited the class to brainstorm with me to find a solution.

- Write down all ideas - without evaluating.
- Together decide which ideas we plan to use and how we plan to implement them. (p. 130-131)

I was intrigued by these statements, and while reflecting in my journals, I considered the previous statements when analyzing the day. For instance, in one particular reflection, I wrote:

Today I paid more attention to the language I use in order to make progress. My mentor left in the afternoon for a meeting in the building, and I took this as an opportunity to examine how I was talking with the students. After listening to the recording of the afternoon, I noticed various things. At the end of math when I was trying to transition into recess, I noticed in my voice a hint of frustration. I can clearly remember this instance as well. However, in my previous state of mind, I would have raised my voice and demanded the attention of the class. However, through the course of this year, I have picked up on several new strategies. One is to turn off the lights so that the class acknowledges me. The other is to wait patiently and speak quietly so that those students who can hear me will assist me in gaining the attention of the rest of the class. This is what I did in this instance. In a calm voice I simply reminded the students that we would be going to recess and that their recess time was starting. So, without exerting any energy or raising my voice, the

class brought their attention to me to hear the directions. (April 4, 2006)

During a guided reading lesson that took place during Language Workshop, I noticed in a voice recording that there was a particular instance where I stated to a student, “Is that a good way to treat the study guide?” I was referring to the fact that the student was rolling and folding the study guide that they would need to use at the next station. I firmly believe that prior to investigating my language, I would have simply said “Don’t do that!” and continued on with the lesson. But, instead, I posed a question to the student, which required that the student think about what action he was doing that was inappropriate as well as change the action. Coincidentally, during the same Language Workshop recording, I heard another instance in which I presented a student with a question rather than giving him the direct answer. A student came to me to show me his finished work. He then wanted to know what to do with it. Rather than tell him exactly what he needed to do, I simply said, “Where does finished work go?” which required that he solve his own question.

While I don’t believe that I have mastered the art of this language quite yet, I do believe that I have made the necessary changes needed to begin implementing this language in my teaching style. I also have evidence that this is true from an evaluation that was conducted at the conclusion of my fall semester and again during the second semester. Along with my PDA and mentor teacher, we concluded that I have, “...consciously tried to use

questioning and student-centered strategies when managing behavior. She has made great improvement in this area.”

Claim #4: I believe that the language used within the classroom impacts the children.

Evidence:

In order to understand how my students have been impacted by the language I have started using in the classroom, I chose to hold a class meeting following a lesson plan I designed in collaboration with my mentor (Appendix A). Through this class meeting, I began by presenting students with the questions:

- What does a mean voice sound like?
- What does a happy voice sound like?
- What does a bossy voice sound like?

Through our discussion, I was pleasantly surprised by the responses I received. It surprised me that students understood exactly what I meant and were able to address the topic. I was also surprised that the students could verbalize their feelings and emotions in regards to the various languages they are exposed to in their every day life. If there were any doubts in my mind based on my other evidence, they were erased when my students expressed themselves during our class meeting. The following excerpt shows the conclusion of the class meeting where I addressed the issue of a teacher’s *bossy voice*:

Teacher: Here's an example. Let's say at the end of the day, I said to Jill*, "Jill, put your folder in your backpack, clean out your cubby, and put your chair up!" Jill, how would that make you feel?

Jill: Like the teacher was telling me exactly what to do.

Student A: It would make me feel like the teacher didn't like me.

Teacher: Now, let's say I said to Jill, "Jill, what do you need to remember to do at the end of the day so we can get to dismissal on time?" What did you notice was different from the first time?

Student A: The first time it was rude and mean. The second time it was nicer because you spoke nicer.

Teacher: Was there something different about how I talked to her? The first time, I told her exactly what to do. How was the second time different?

Student B: You asked her a question.

Teacher: How does it make you feel when a teacher is nice and asks you questions?

Student C: It makes me feel good because you're not bossing me around.

Student D: It makes me happy because I can answer the question.

Student A: It makes me feel like they are concerned about me.

Student E: It makes me feel good on the inside.

Student C: When someone is bossy, I don't want to be around them. It hurts my feelings.

Teacher: So, how would you like to be reminded of something you need to do?

Student F: I would want the teacher to talk nice and ask me what I need to do.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Implications for Teacher Practice

I believe that through this inquiry, I have developed a form of language that will invite, promote, and encourage independence, which will result in a transfer of responsibility for thinking and acting to the students within my classroom. There are countless benefits to using a less direct form of language within the classroom, and I feel confident that I can apply what I have learned through this experience to future classrooms.

New Wonderings

1. How do I approach a student who does not respond to this new form of language in a positive way?
 - Now that I have examined the positive effects that the use of this language has on my students and myself, how do I approach a child who does not respond to a form of language that involves questioning?
2. Is there a time when I should be direct?
 - After having examined my language during various times and events during the course of the day, I am curious to know if there is an instance where a more direct approach is necessary. For instance, when dealing with students on a field trip or during a presentation by a guest speaker, is it appropriate to use a more direct form of language?

Overall, I have truly enjoyed my first inquiry investigation. I have learned a great deal about myself as a teacher, which, I believe, will aid me when I continue on with my teaching career. I was able to experience the positive

effects this form of language had on my attitude and teaching style and how positively it impacted students. I look forward to my continued exploration into this type of language as well as the implementation in my future classroom.

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Appendix A

Class Meeting Lesson Plan

Tuesday, April 18th
Class Meeting

Students will gather on the carpet with their chairs and we will sit in a circle.

T: Can someone demonstrate a *mean* voice for me (continue with *scary, sad, happy, nice*)

T: How does a nice voice make you feel?

T: What do you think when someone uses a nice, happy voice?

T: How does a bossy person sound?

T: Who sometimes has to use a bossy voice? (principals, teachers, parents, brothers/sisters)

T: Can teachers be bossy?

T: If teachers can be bossy, should they be? Is there a time when teachers should be bossy or need to be bossy?

T: Do you like it when teachers are bossy? How does it make you feel?

T: Now, there are times during the day where we need to be reminded or helped to make better choices. How would you like to be talked to when a teacher needs to remind you about something?

T: It's time to pack up. _____, put your chair up and get your jacket and don't forget your folder and you need to check your cubby.

T: Or this - What should we be doing now boys and girls? _____, what else do you need to do to be ready to go home? (Be sure to use the same TONE of voice with each--very neutral--so they will have to think about what was said instead of how it was said which would be easier for them)

T: What's different for _____ when the teacher talks in a bossy way instead of letting her be responsible?

T: How did you feel, _____, when I spoke to you the first way? How did you feel when I spoke to you the second time?

T: I am wondering how it makes you feel when a teacher tells you exactly what you need to do and they speak in a harsh tone? (call on students who raise their hand)

T: How do you feel when a teacher helps you figure something out by asking you questions? (call on students)