

## CHAPTER ONE



# General Guidelines for Teacher Language

---

**D**uring the course of any school day, teachers can easily find themselves needing to speak with students in a dozen different ways, depending on the situation. This book will go into many of those situations and ways of speaking. First, this chapter will discuss five general guidelines for the use of teacher language. These underpin all the specific strategies offered in the rest of this book. The guidelines are:

1. Be direct and authentic.
2. Show faith in children's abilities and intentions.
3. Keep it action oriented.
4. Keep it brief.
5. Know when to be silent.

While these principles may seem simple, it's in reflecting on the details embedded in them that we truly come to understand their power.

## **BE DIRECT AND AUTHENTIC**

When our language is direct and authentic, when we say what we mean and mean what we say, children learn that they can trust us. They learn that we won't use language to trick, manipulate, or confuse them. This feeling of safety must be in place if children are to take the risks that are necessary to learning—to try out fledgling skills, to explore their own and others' thoughts, and to take on challenges. Moreover, direct and authentic teacher language simply allows children to feel respected and to know clearly what the teacher means.

### **SAY WHAT WE MEAN: USING DIRECT LANGUAGE**

Many of us learned to use indirect language as a way to gain easy, cheerful compliance from children. For example, as a new teacher, I found I could often get children to do what I wanted by pointing out what I liked about other children's behavior. "I like the way May and Justine are paying attention," I would cheerfully announce while impatiently eyeing Dave and Marta fooling around in the corner.

When this strategy worked, it was because the children wanted to mimic the desired behavior so that they, too, would win praise and recognition from me. My language did nothing to help them develop autonomy or self-control. And it didn't even always get the children to behave as I wanted them to. I remember well one particular day. It was time to begin Morning Meeting, time for the children to finish their arrival routines and come sit in a circle in the meeting area. This was a well-rehearsed routine. I gave the signal to come to Morning Meeting, but most of the class continued to wander around, chatting and ignoring the signal.

"I like the way Henry and Lucien are sitting on the rug," I said loudly to the rowdy and inattentive group. As they had been doing more and more the past few days, the class ignored me. And why shouldn't they? If I liked the way Henry and Lucien were sitting, that was nice

for the three of us, but it had no bearing on the rest of the class, which had much more compelling things to do at that moment than please me.

My clever strategy was useless. What I should have done instead was speak directly. I should have first used a signal to gain the students' attention, and then told them firmly and calmly, "Come to the meeting rug and take a seat now."

Another language pattern that many teachers use to soften commands in hopes of making them more palatable to children is to phrase directions as questions. "Could you all go back to your seats now?" we find ourselves asking, when what we mean is "Everyone go back to your seats now."

"Everyone go back to your seats now" may seem less respectful than the less direct "Could you all go back to your seats now?" In reality, it's the indirect language that is disrespectful of students despite our best intentions. When I said "I like the way Henry and Lucien are sitting on the rug," I was trying to manipulate the other children to do what I wanted without them being conscious of my control over them. This is also true of directions phrased as questions. It's more respectful simply to tell children what I want them to do because it is honest.

It's true that many children who hear "Could you all go back to your seats now?" will know that it means they are to go back to their seats. But some children, whether it's because they're less verbally skilled or too distracted at the moment to pick up on subtleties, may truly believe they have a choice—to go back to their seat or not—and that both choices are acceptable. They may feel confused or duped when they choose not to go back, only to have their teacher respond with anger or impatience. By contrast, "Everyone go back to your seats now" tells the children that yes, they have two choices—to go back or not go back—but one of the choices is not acceptable. If they still choose not to go back, they do so knowing it's an act of defiance.

#### **CHOOSE AN APPROPRIATE TONE OF VOICE**

Our tone conveys an enormous amount about how we're feeling and what we're truly thinking, perhaps even more than our actual words. It can override the overt meaning of our words and sour our communi-

cation in an instant. For example, the simple reminder “What should you be doing right now?” asked in an even, matter-of-fact tone is respectful and achieves the intended purpose of enabling students to keep themselves on track. But the same words in an angry voice become an attack; said with a sigh, they convey lack of confidence that the student will ever do the right thing.

Sometimes teachers twist their tone on purpose. Consider the phrase “Excuse me.” “Excuse me” said in a warm, matter-of-fact tone means that we want forgiveness for our mistake. But the same words said with emphasis on the second syllable of “excuse” (“Excuse me!”) or with a stridently questioning tone (“Excuse me???”) become “You’re being rude,” “You’re being stupid,” or “You’re being sassy.” Using a singsong voice and drawing out the syllables (“Exxxx-cuuusse meeee”) means “I’m reminding you to mind your manners.”

What happens when we use these raised, fake questioning, or singsong tones? Our communication becomes indirect and unauthentic. My experience is that regardless of our intentions, the result is that children tend to feel humiliated and resentful, or at least confused. They may stop trusting their teacher and stop trusting the classroom to be a safe place.

In general, a warm, matter-of-fact tone is what teachers should aim for. It conveys authenticity, respect, and directness. If what we want to do is remind students to use their manners, we should do that directly—for example, by asking in a straightforward tone, “What did we say about disagreeing respectfully?” And if we want to draw a student’s attention to rude behavior, we could issue, in a firm and kind voice, a redirection such as “Robbie, friendly words.” (See Chapters 6 and 7 for more on reminders and redirections.)

### BE CAREFUL OF SARCASM SLIPPING IN

As many teachers know, it can be easy for sarcasm to slip into our classroom language, especially after a long day. Sometimes we insert sarcasm thinking it will provide some comic relief; other times we’re just tired and it slips in without our even knowing it.

While sarcasm may have a place in literature, comedy, and other arenas, it can be damaging in the classroom, where the teacher’s role

is not to entertain or be buddies with the children, but to maintain a professional teacher–student relationship. Direct and authentic language is a tool of this professionalism, and sarcasm is the antithesis, since the intended meaning in sarcasm is the exact opposite of the words used. It is also most commonly used to insult. The American Heritage® Dictionary (Pickett 2000) defines sarcasm as “a cutting, often ironic remark intended to wound” and “intended to make its victim the butt of contempt or ridicule.”

Superficially, sarcastic comments may add a bit of humor to an otherwise tense situation. “John, what part of ‘Put your phone away’ don’t you understand?” a teacher may say, mimicking a line from pop culture. The children laugh, and the teacher thinks she has shown that she is hip and has a sense of humor. But John has just been embarrassed, and his trust in his teacher diminishes. The position of the teacher may be diminished in the other students’ eyes as well, even if they laughed, because they no longer see the teacher as an authority that protects their emotional safety but someone who freely uses the currency of insult.

For younger elementary school children, the use of sarcasm may also be confusing. They may sense from their teacher’s body language that they have been insulted or that something is funny, but they may not yet comprehend the concept of irony and may not “get” the intended message. If comic relief is what is needed, it’s better to take a break from the normal routine and play a tension-relieving game or two. Alternatively, we can simply repeat our directions or give a direct reminder and be ready to follow through with actions if students do not respond appropriately.

#### **MEAN WHAT WE SAY: FOLLOWING THROUGH ON OUR WORDS**

Just as important as saying what we mean is meaning what we say. When children know that teachers will follow through on their words, they’re likely to take the words seriously. If I tell my class that they must speak softly, using “inside voices,” then it’s important that I hold to this expectation. Suppose I’m working with a small group, and the rest of the class is getting louder and louder. It may be tempting to keep going and stop the class only when they’re so noisy that I can’t hear the stu-

dents I'm working with. But that would tell the class they don't have to take my words seriously. What I should do is take action as soon as I hear the first voice rise above the acceptable level. I could use a signal for attention and then issue a reminder about inside voices, or I could direct the noisy student to move to a spot closer to me.

Meaning what we say implies we should say only what we can, and will, follow through on. If I know I'll allow loud talking because I won't feel it's truly a problem, then I should reconsider telling the children they have to use soft voices in the first place. My words carry the most weight when the students see that I back them up with action.

### **AVOID OVER-GENERALIZATIONS**

Over-generalizations are common in teacher language. "This is going to be hard," we might say at the beginning of a new unit or new activity. Our intention may be to show empathy or to alert students to gear up for extra effort, but what we've done is presented a sweeping statement as being true for everyone when it may not be. In fact we don't know that the new unit or activity will be hard for everyone. What about the students who don't find it hard? What's the message to them? "This is going to be hard" may also cause some children to feel the task is hard when they wouldn't have found it particularly difficult otherwise. Similar problems result when a teacher tells a class "This will be easy" or "This is going to be fun."

It's more authentic and supportive to speak with the first-person voice or the tentative third-person voice in these cases. For example, we could say "I found this fun" or "Some people may find this fun." Introducing a challenging book, a teacher could try "It took me a while to get into this book. I'll be interested to hear how it goes for you."

### **BE AWARE OF THE SIGNALS YOUR BODY SENDS**

Body language—our gestures, body postures, and facial expressions—is an important part of authentic communication. Various authorities report that approximately ninety percent of the total impact of a personal communication comes from body language (Garrison 1984). Much has been written on how to use body language effectively so

that it's consistent with what we want to communicate. While this book will not go into this, it's important to point out that when our words are not true to our intentions, our body language is likely to give us away.

For example, a teacher may tell a student that she's ready to listen to him while looking at another group of students. Her words say she's ready to listen, but her eyes tell a different story. "We're having a good day!" a teacher may announce with a steely tone and down-turned mouth. Or a teacher may say, "Let's all just calm down" in a high-pitched voice while wringing her hands.

Students can see such discrepancies. Human brains are very good at monitoring subtleties of facial expressions to read a person's mood and attitude. We do this so rapidly that we often aren't aware we're doing it. This process begins in infancy. (Johnson 2004) Certainly by the time children are in school, they're quite adept at it. And when children see a mismatch between a teacher's words and body language, they may lose trust in the teacher or simply get confused: "My teacher says she's ready to listen, but she doesn't look like it. Should I talk or not?" "The teacher is saying we're having a good day, but he looks like he's mad at us. What does he really think?"

So, what are we to do about these potential discrepancies in words and body language? I believe the most important thing is to be aware of the signals our body is sending, and then use that awareness to check the authenticity of our words. So often, we say things out of habit without quite realizing that our words aren't genuine. If, however, a teacher does a quick body check before saying, for example, "We're having a good day," he may notice his down-turned mouth or hard gaze. This would tell the teacher that the words about to be uttered are not genuine. The teacher then would have two choices: tell the class "We're having a hard day" if it would be constructive to do so, or wait until he's genuinely feeling good about the day before saying "We're having a good day." Either way, the message would be authentic, the students would understand the teacher's message clearly, and they would feel respected.

## **SHOW FAITH IN CHILDREN'S ABILITIES AND INTENTIONS**

Because language is such a powerful shaper of identity and perceptions, it's vital that teachers carefully use it to open, rather than close, the doors of possibility for children. Our language conveys our assumptions and expectations, which, in turn, influence students' assumptions and expectations. Suppose a teacher says "When everyone is ready, I'll show how to plant the seeds" or "You can look at the chart to remind yourself of our ideas for good story writing." These words convey a belief that children want to cooperate, listen, and do good work, while also giving the children information about how they can follow through on those good intentions.

"Show me how you will follow the rules in the hall" conveys an expectation that students know how to follow the rules they practiced and will do so. "I'll be watching for interesting strategies you discover to help you solve the math problems" conveys both the belief that students are capable of thinking creatively and independently and the assumption that their work will be interesting.

### **TAKE TIME TO NOTICE THE POSITIVES**

Often, showing faith in children's abilities and intentions means taking the time to notice and comment on the things they do well. "You finished cleanup in less than five minutes today!" "You're trying lots of different ideas for solving that problem. That takes persistence." "I see that you're using your dictionary skills." Such observations tell children why we have confidence in them and provide hard evidence that they should believe in themselves. When children believe in themselves, they are more likely to work hard at learning and to enjoy the process.

### **AVOID BABY TALK**

Adults often use baby talk when speaking to infants. We pitch our voices higher and sometimes louder than normal, use a singsong and exaggeratedly cheerful tone, answer our own questions, and repeat a lot. Sometimes we also purposely mispronounce words to sound more like a

young child or use the “royal we” (as in “How are we feeling today?”). We may introduce a more breathy quality to our voices and exaggerate syllables in ways we don’t when speaking to peers.

While aspects of baby talk do serve important purposes when communicating with babies and pets (Baron 1989), it can be counterproductive when used with school-age children. Baby talk may imply affection, but because it’s affection that assumes the listener has limited capacities, it can leave children feeling that we don’t take them seriously. It’s better to communicate with students in the same voice we would use with adults and to express our caring in straightforward ways. For example, instead of “How are we feeling today?” we can simply say “How are you feeling today?”

#### **BE AWARE OF LANGUAGE PATTERNS THAT TREAT BOYS AND GIRLS DIFFERENTLY**

Teachers by and large are very committed to providing equal opportunities to girls and boys, and may be dismayed to discover that unconscious language patterns can often undermine their efforts. Yet researchers have found that from kindergarten through graduate school, teachers are more likely to use supportive language with male than female students. (Little 2004)

Perhaps it’s because we’ve internalized communication patterns from our own schooling or from our larger society, but teachers as a group tend to provide longer wait time for boys, give more eye contact when speaking with or listening to boys, call on boys more often than girls, and say the student’s name more often when speaking with boys. We’re also more likely to give boys feedback on the quality of their ideas (such as “You’ve put a lot of thought into that”) and to support boys’ autonomy by helping them figure things out (for example, “Where could you look to find the answer?” rather than supplying them with the answer). All this is true, according to researchers, regardless of the teacher’s gender or ethnicity or the grade they teach.

Because differences in how we communicate with girls and boys are often unconscious, the critical first step is to carefully listen to ourselves

to see if we are using language unequally. Are we giving girls the answers right away more often? Do we give boys more wait time? Are we calling on boys more often? As we become more aware of any unequal uses of language, we can make a conscious effort to correct any imbalances.

Often the best way to raise our awareness is to ask a colleague to observe our teaching for an hour or two and take notes about our interactions with girls and boys. Specifically, we can ask the observer to take detailed notes about wait time, eye contact, whom we call on, and what kind of feedback we give to girls versus boys and then to discuss this with us afterwards. Another possibility is to ask someone to videotape us and then evaluate the tape ourselves. It's amazing what can become obvious when we see ourselves on camera.

### **KEEP IT ACTION ORIENTED**

Keeping language action oriented means connecting abstract terms with concrete behaviors and describing children's behaviors instead of their character or feelings. This kind of language allows children to learn at their best and be their best selves because it tells them how.

#### **CONNECT ABSTRACT TERMS WITH CONCRETE BEHAVIORS**

Elementary school children learn best through concrete activities and interactions with their environment. Teachers, therefore, can communicate most effectively with children by naming specific and concrete actions rather than abstract terms. For example, rather than telling children, "Be responsible," a teacher might try telling them specifically what she expects them to do. "When you come in to class in the morning, first put your things away, and then read the morning message. After that you may talk quietly with classmates." And instead of saying students' behavior is "disrespectful," it may be more productive to say "Remember—kind words and a friendly face."

Sometimes, rather than naming the concrete behaviors ourselves, it's effective to prompt students to do it. For example, to a student who tends to be unfocused during writing time, I might say "What will help you think of good ideas for your story and concentrate on writing them

down today?” The student might then respond, “I can look at our ideas chart,” “I can find a quiet place to write away from my friends,” or “I can tell myself not to stop until I write down three good ideas.”

This is not to say that there is no place for the use of abstract terms such as “responsible” and “respectful.” It just means that children need plenty of opportunities to associate them with concrete actions. Indeed, many teachers find it effective to articulate with students such classroom rules as “Treat each other with respect” and “Be responsible.” These expectations will be most meaningful to children if we help them picture and practice what the expectations look like in different situations, since we can’t assume that children already know. When first introducing these expectations and in periodic refresher conversations, we might ask, “What does it look like when people are being respectful of each other when lining up?” and then “What does it sound like?” “If you’re being responsible in the cafeteria, what are you doing? What might you be saying?” “What would you be doing to be successful workers during science?” A conversation prompts children’s active thinking and allows the teacher to supply ideas if the children are truly stumped. (For more on this topic, see Brady et al. 2003.)

Some teachers make T-charts to help with such discussions. Heading the chart is an abstract term such as “cooperation.” Underneath, there’s a column of students’ ideas about what cooperation looks like—concrete behaviors such as sharing materials or considering everyone’s suggestions in a discussion. Next to this column are students’ ideas about what cooperation sounds like—perhaps phrases such as “Please,” “Thank you,” “Can I help?” and “What’s your idea?” (See example on next page.)

### **DESCRIBE BEHAVIOR, NOT CHARACTER OR ATTITUDE**

When teachers notice a behavior that they want a student to change, it’s more effective to name the desired behavior than say something about the child’s character or attitude. I have found myself saying in frustration to a child who chronically does poor work, “I don’t think you even care!” While this may allow me to vent, it does nothing to help the child change. It gives the student no feedback about what he or she is doing wrong or right, and it closes down constructive discus-

## Cooperation

### Looks like:

### Sounds like:

Share materials	"Please"
Consider everyone's suggestions	"What's your idea?"
Offer help	"Can I help?"
Take turns	"Thank you"
Ask questions	"Does that make sense to you?"
Listen	"So what you're saying is ...?"
Go along when it's not your first choice	"This game isn't my first choice, but I'll play it."

sion and reflection. The child's energy is likely to go toward defending against the negative judgment, not toward examining and changing his or her behavior. Worse, this kind of language can lead the child to accept the judgment and believe that he or she indeed doesn't care.

It's more helpful to issue a positive challenge to this child, such as "Today, let's see if you can think of a way to get yourself excited about this project. What would help you do that?" When we describe desired behaviors like this, the focus is on what students can do. It shows them how they can be their best selves rather than limiting them to a teacher's judgments of their character.

When we must describe unwanted behavior to get students to understand what it is they are to change, it's important to name specific behaviors in a straightforward, matter-of-fact way and to steer clear of making global judgments. Ms. Tobias, a fourth grade teacher, complained to me about a student, Jared, who seldom put effort into his work. She had adapted assignments to try to make them more interesting to him, she had cajoled, and she had set firm limits, such as "You may not go to recess until you do your assignment." Nothing seemed to work. On a particularly trying day, Ms. Tobias hit her limit. "You've got to stop being so lazy," she warned Jared, "or you'll never get anywhere in this world."

I asked Ms. Tobias what Jared was doing that made her believe he was lazy. “Well,” she said, “he just sits through lessons fooling with things in his desk. He wanders around the room when he’s supposed to be working on independent assignments, and he only does about half the work he’s supposed to.”

“Try telling him that,” I suggested, “without using terms like ‘lazy.’ And try to describe some things that he does well, too.” Together, Ms. Tobias and I rehearsed some specific language that she might use.

Back in the classroom soon after, Ms. Tobias sat down with Jared and described some of his more positive behaviors. “Jared, you’re a friendly guy, and I’ve noticed that kids like to be around you.” Then she described the behaviors that concerned her. “I’ve also been noticing that you often play with things in your desk when it’s time to listen to me or to other kids. I’ve noticed that you wander around the room a lot instead of doing your work and you’re only finishing about half your assignments.”

“Oh,” Jared said. After thinking a moment, he added, “I guess so, but it’s hard to concentrate.”

Jared and Ms. Tobias began to engage in a conversation about what he could do differently so he could get more work done and how she might help with that. His behavior didn’t change overnight, but it did begin to improve slowly as he and his teacher experimented with those ideas.

The shift toward constructive problem solving happened only after Ms. Tobias dropped her use of the term “lazy” and focused on describing the behaviors that concerned her.

#### **KEEP THE WORDING NONJUDGMENTAL**

Often our words contain assumptions and judgments that are indirectly stated. This is called “presupposition” because the speaker is supposing something is true but is not directly stating it. An example is “If you really cared, you’d study harder.” The indirectly stated assumption is “You don’t care.” Although these words seem to be about the student’s behavior of not studying very hard, it’s really about the student’s character of not caring.

One problem with presuppositions is that they present an assumption that's not up for discussion. When a teacher says "If you really cared, . . .," the student isn't given a chance to offer another view of the situation. Naturally the student might become defensive. "I do care!" the student might retort. Now the conversation takes on an adversarial tone, with the student fighting to defend his character and the teacher perhaps feeling compelled to hold ground as well.

A more effective way for this teacher to discuss concerns about studying would be to stick to describing the problematic behavior. An example is "I notice you haven't turned in your homework for several days in a row." This nonjudgmental wording allows the student to offer her take on the situation and for the teacher and student to go into a problem solving mode.

Other examples of presupposition are "Why don't you ever . . . ?" (as in "Why don't you ever listen?") and "Why do you always . . . ?" (as in "Why do you always try to outsmart the rules?") These are not genuine questions, but rather accusations. Such messages can undermine a teacher's relationships with students and make it less likely that students will change and grow.

### **KEEP IT BRIEF**

Children need us to speak with brevity. It's hard for them to follow long strings of words. I sometimes wonder if this is why they say they got "yelled at" when I gave them what I thought was a "firm explanation." Even though my voice isn't raised at all and I am in fact being quite reasonable and calm, the children hear only an overwhelming jumble of words, perhaps along with body language that says they're being corrected for some misbehavior. This basically feels to them like they're being yelled at.

Long explanations, however reasoned and well-intentioned, are usually counterproductive. "When you go out to recess today, be sure to remember to follow the rules for using the equipment, because yesterday some kids got hurt and I'm pretty sure it was because they weren't following the rules. You were doing really well for a while there, but

lately it seems like you're getting kind of careless, and that's got to change or we may have to use recess time to review and practice the rules. I know you don't want that, so let's have a good recess today."

By the time the teacher is finished talking, many of the students will be thinking about other things. Few will have followed the entire explanation.

Children often actually understand more when we speak less. Instead of the above explanation, a teacher might say, "Who can tell us the rules for using equipment at recess?" This gives children an opportunity to remind themselves of the rules. Another approach might be to say, "I'll be waiting to hear about the ways in which you made recess safe for everybody today." If the expectations for recess have been adequately taught and practiced, children will be able to understand and make use of such a reminder. Not only would additional explanations be largely lost on them, but after a long string of words, the core message to play safely would likely be lost as well.

#### LEAVE OUT THE WARNINGS

It can be tempting to warn children what will happen if they don't heed reminders and directions. For example, if a class is playing dangerously at recess, it might seem natural in the moment to say to them, "If this kind of playing continues, we may have to use recess time to review and practice the rules." But bear in mind that such warnings are generally not effective and too often come across like threats.

The problem with threats is that they convey three negative messages: First, they tell children that we think they're unlikely to behave well. Second, they emphasize the teacher's power to get children in trouble rather than the children's power to take care of themselves. And third, it makes the fixing of our mistakes (in this example, the reviewing and practicing of recess rules) feel like a punishment and therefore something to avoid, rather than a positive way to learn and grow. Children get these messages loud and clear. Warnings or threats thus undermine both children's self-confidence and their trust in the teacher. If a teacher believes the class needs to review and practice recess rules, it's better simply to have them do this than to hold it out as a threat.

## KNOW WHEN TO BE SILENT

The skillful use of silence can be just as powerful as the skillful use of language. Silence allows for children's voices. It provides time for thinking, rehearsing what to say, and sometimes for gathering the courage to speak at all. To be sure, our days are often so tightly scheduled and fast paced that allowing time for silence may seem difficult, if not wasteful. But silence is essential to the optimal development of self-control, community, and academic knowledge. And teachers who have allowed silence usually find that it doesn't take as long as they thought. Little bits of silence go a long way.

Below are four examples of the skillful use of silence in the classroom.

### PROVIDE WAIT TIME

Researchers tell us that when teachers wait three to five seconds before they take responses to a question, more students respond, and their ideas are more thoughtful and complete. This wait time seems to allow students to do higher level thinking. (Rowe 1974; Swift and Gooding 1983; Tobin 1980) Most teachers wait much less than three to five seconds, though: Typically they wait only one second to call on students after asking a question (Rowe 1974). Yet few among us, child or adult, can form a complete thought in this amount of time. In the rush to have an answer—any answer—we shortcut or skip the thinking and go straight to talking. We come out with answers of questionable quality, shortchanging our learning as a result. By simply pausing a few seconds to call on students, teachers can raise the quality of classroom conversations.

Teacher modeling is critical here. If we want students to pause and think before speaking, we should do the same ourselves. After a student makes a comment, we can wait a few seconds before we make a comment. Our pace sets a pace for the entire classroom. If we take our time responding, students are likely to do the same—plus our comments are likely to be more thoughtful. Moreover, by pausing a bit before responding to students, we're showing respect for them. We're saying "I want

to make sure you've had a chance to express your idea completely and accurately before we move on" and "I want to think well about what you said before I respond."

Many teachers report that pausing three to five seconds can feel uncomfortably long at first. The key is to stick to it, perhaps counting silently to mark the seconds. With practice, this pace will begin to feel more natural and will eventually become automatic.

To make wait time more successful, we can teach children to wait for a signal from us before raising their hands to respond to a question. This allows all the children time to think without a sea of waving hands distracting them or causing them to feel like failures if they don't also have an immediate response. Without waving hands, the wait time is also less likely to feel long. Rather than a forced silence threatening to burst, the seconds become a calm space for thoughtful reflection.

Related to providing wait time is slowing down our words. We need to speak more slowly with children than with colleagues and friends. One four-year study of 10,000 children found that a slower pace of talking combined with steady eye contact improved literacy and reduced behavior problems. In the words of researcher Ken Rowe, "Teachers speak far too quickly. There is too much information going through the [students'] auditory gate. Either nothing goes through or what goes through is garbled." (Doherty 2004) Simply slowing down our words allows children time to process and make meaning of them.

#### **LISTEN TO WHAT STUDENTS HAVE TO SAY**

Sometimes teachers simply talk too much. In our eagerness to guide and inform, we fill the air with our pearls of wisdom when we should be asking our students for their pearls, then listening carefully to what they have to say. Not only does listening to students model respectful interaction in a community of learners, but it actually helps students learn because speaking is an important means of formulating knowledge. Children are more likely to learn and remember the content they have spoken about.

For many of us, skillful listening takes some practice. It means resist-

ing the impulse to finish thoughts for children when they articulate slowly or fumble for words. It means that we don't interrupt to correct, elaborate on, or repeat their words, or even to affirm or praise what they're saying. To listen is to hold our silence while maintaining eye contact until the speaker is clearly done and to try to understand what the speaker is saying before formulating a response. This means that we pause before we reply. It may mean we paraphrase the speaker's message before adding our own thoughts or moving to another speaker or topic. (See Chapter 4 for more about pausing and paraphrasing.)

### REFRAIN FROM REPEATING DIRECTIONS

An important way of using silence is to resist the impulse to repeat directions. If I want students to take their homework as part of their dismissal routine and we've practiced that routine well, I should give that direction once, check to see if there are any questions, and stop. I should resist reminding them one last time to get their homework as they gather their things and line up for dismissal. This helps children develop autonomy because it gives them a chance to remember the direction themselves and experience the consequences of either remembering or forgetting. If I'm too diligent with constant reminders, the children are less likely to learn to take responsibility themselves.

This does not mean, of course, that I let the children flounder if they have trouble remembering the direction or are confused by it. But there's a difference between helping them figure it out and repeating the direction. Instead of immediately repeating the direction, it can be valuable to try the "helping" step. For example, if I tell the children to gather their art supplies before getting into their groups, and right away everyone gets into their groups empty-handed, chattering and laughing, it would be appropriate for me to say, "Freeze! What should you be doing right now?" If I notice an individual child having trouble with a direction I gave, I might ask, "Would you like some ideas?" or even wait until the child asks for advice before I say anything at all. In all these cases, the children are given a chance to remember and to figure something out for themselves.

### RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO USE VOICE-OVERS

A voice-over is a repeating of a student's response right after it's uttered. For instance, I ask the class, "How many days are in a year?" A student responds, "365," and I quickly repeat, "Right, 365," before going to my next question. Or I ask, "What kind of a person do you think Johnny Appleseed was?" I call on Amos, who says, "Kind," and I say, "Kind. What else?" Kate says, "Strong to plant so many trees." I say, "Okay, strong. Who has another idea?"

When I am tempted to use voice-overs, it's because I want to affirm students' words and make sure everyone has heard them. The unintended message, however, is that the children's words are important only if I repeat them, and that the rest of the group needs only to listen to me, since I'll always repeat anything I deem important.

When I catch myself using voice-overs, I try to remember the power of silence. By not repeating, I allow the student's voice to stand on its own, establishing for the whole class that it's important to listen to each other. If classmates couldn't hear what was said, I ask the student to repeat it in a louder and clearer voice. This is more affirming of students' words than echoing them.

### SUMMARY

The general guidelines outlined in this chapter serve as the foundation for effective teacher language. The following chapters will look at various types of teacher language in depth and give recommendations for specific situations. All those further ideas and strategies have, as common threads running through them, the five principles described in this chapter:

- \* Be direct and authentic.
- \* Show faith in children's abilities and intentions.
- \* Keep it action oriented.
- \* Keep it brief.
- \* Know when to be silent.

Incorporating these principles into our daily communications with students is critical to building a classroom where students feel safe, respected, appreciated, and interested in learning. The power of teacher language cannot be overstated. The language we use with students every day influences how they see themselves, their teacher, their classmates, and their experience with learning. By paying attention to this power and using it to open rather than close the doors of possibility for children, we help them become self-confident, engaged learners.

---

### WORKS CITED

- Baron, N. S. 1989. "The Uses of Baby Talk." *ERIC Digest*. Eric Document Reproduction Service #ED 318230.
- Brady, Kathryn, Mary Beth Forton, Deborah Porter, and Chip Wood. 2003. *Rules in School*. Turners Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children, Inc.
- Doherty, Linda. 2004. "Children Drowning in a Sea of Blah." *The Age* (November 1). [www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/10/29/1099028201302.html](http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/10/29/1099028201302.html).
- Garrison, L. 1984. "Communicating the Nonverbal Way." *Journal of Business Education* 59(5): 190-192.
- Johnson, Steven. 2004. *Mind Wide Open*. New York: Scribner.
- Little, Deandra. 2004. "Gender Dynamics in the Classroom" in *Teaching a Diverse Student Body: Practical Strategies for Enhancing Our Students' Learning*. 2nd ed. University of Virginia Teaching Resource Center. <http://trc.virginia.edu/Publications/Diversity/PDFs/TOC.pdf>
- Pickett, Joseph P., editor, et al. 2000. *American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*. 4th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Rowe, M. B. 1974. "Wait-Time and Rewards as Instructional Variables, Their Influence on Language, Logic, and Fate Control. I. Wait-Time." *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* 11: 81-94.

Swift, J. N. and T. Gooding. 1983. "Interaction of wait time feedback and questioning instruction on middle school science teaching." *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 20(8): 721-730.

Tobin, K. G. 1980. "The effect of an extended teacher wait-time on science achievement." *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* 17: 469-475.