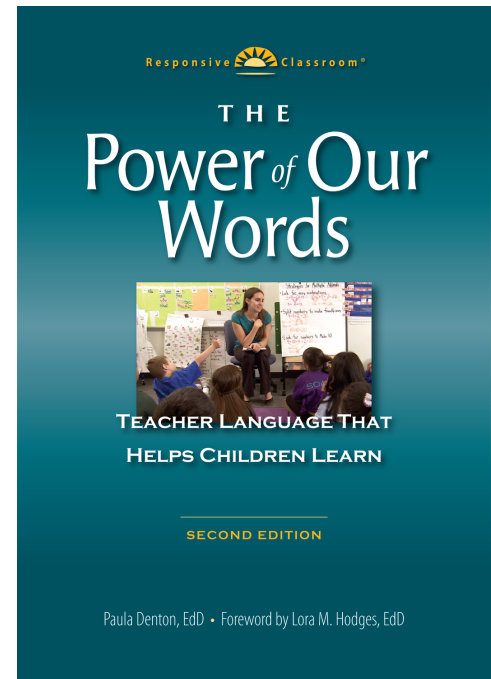# The Power of Our Words
Teacher Language That Helps Children Learn, 2nd edition

Introduction ▪ Why Our Words Matter

1. Looking over the definition of "teacher language" on page 3, what words or phrases stand out for you? Why?

2. The author asserts that language is far more than simple speech; it actually shapes our listeners' thoughts, feelings, and experiences. How does this match your experience of how:

- your teachers' language affected you as a student?
- your language has affected your students?

3. Of the three broad goals of teacher language discussed in this introduction (gaining academic skills and knowledge, developing self-control, and building a sense of community), which one especially resonates with you? Why?

4. Skim the many quotes of effective teacher language in this introduction. What, if anything, strikes you about them? Does anything jump out as similar to or different from the way you usually speak to students?

Chapter One ▪ General Guidelines for Teacher Language

1. The author identifies five key guidelines to help you use teacher language effectively. Which guideline do you find most intriguing, exciting, puzzling, potentially useful? Why?

2. When we speak to children, they gather information not just from our words but also from our tone of voice. Thinking back to your own school days, did you have teachers who talked in a way that made you feel respected, safe, and ready to learn? How would you describe that tone?

3. The author suggests using T-charts to help students understand the concrete behaviors (actions and words) that express abstract concepts such as "Be kind." What other strategies might you use to help children understand what abstract concepts look and sound like in action?

4. Consider the book's four suggestions for skillfully using silence as part of your teacher language. Which of these ways do you think you already use well? Which do you think might be most challenging for you to implement? Which would be easiest?

5. Now that you've studied this chapter on general guidelines for using teacher language, can you think of any personal, specific guidelines that might help you keep doing what you're doing well when it comes to teacher language, and build upon it?

Chapter Two ▪ Envisioning: Language as a Spyglass

1. The author suggests that to create uplifting visions for our students, we think about their deepest ideals (pp. 34–36). What are your students' deepest ideals? As the author notes, thinking about what's most important to them, what their areas of struggle are, and what's going on in their larger world can help crystallize your ideas.

2. This chapter discusses two ways to use envisioning language: to set a positive tone for future work and to engage children in problem-solving. Can you think of other situations in which you might use envisioning language?

3. ———————— S C E N A R I O ————————

You're getting ready to teach a math unit that will require students to learn some challenging new concepts and skills.

What's a vision statement you might use to get them off to an energized start with a sense of themselves as capable math learners?

4. ———————— S C E N A R I O ————————

The class has charged ahead into their challenging math unit, but now, as the complexity increases, students are beginning to complain that the work is too hard, that they can't do it.

Try crafting a vision statement to help students "imagine themselves behaving and achieving in ways beyond their current reality" (p. 33).

5. Does crafting vision statements seem easy or hard to you? Why?

Chapter Three ■ Open-Ended Questions: Stretching Children's Academic and Social Learning

1. The author discusses four reasons why open-ended questions are so powerful (pp. 49–53). When reading this section, where did you say "Hmm . . ." or "Wow!" to yourself? What questions, if any, did this reading raise for you?

2. Pages 54 and 55 give many examples of open-ended questions for different purposes and situations. Which purposes, situations, or specific examples do you find especially interesting (puzzling, surprising, powerful, etc.)? Why?

3. Think of a time when you asked students an effective open-ended question—one that stretched their learning in some way. How did students respond? What specifically made the question effective? How might you apply the same kind of question to another classroom situation?

4. ———————————— S C E N A R I O ————————————

   You're observing someone teaching a unit on astronomy. Students seemed excited and interested at first, but now they're responding to the teacher's open-ended questions with unimaginative answers and little interest, or with off-topic, unrealistic answers. You hear the teacher ask several problematic open-ended questions and think these questions might be the source of students' lack of engagement.

   How would you reword the following questions to make them more engaging and effective?

   • "What did you notice in that video?" (too broad; doesn't articulate boundaries of what the teacher wants the students to think about)

   • "What's hard for you about astronomy?" (said to a student who's sensitive about her academic struggles; can make a student who lacks confidence feel put on the spot)

   • "Well, yes, constellations sometimes have fun names, but what are some more interesting facts about constellations?" (pseudo open-ended question)

Chapter Four ▪ Listening: Understanding the Message in the Words

1. The author describes listening as a three-step process (p. 72). Which step of the process comes most easily to you? Which do you struggle with?

2. Review the section of this chapter called "Why Listen?" (pp. 72–77). Which of the author's reasons for listening resonates most deeply for you? Why?

3. Think of a class in high school or college that you really loved and learned a lot from. What was the instructor like as a listener? What specifically did he or she say or do to convince you that you were really being heard?

4. How could you and your colleagues help each other improve your use of the strategy of pausing?

5. Of the five strategies the author offers for using paraphrasing effectively (pp. 80–83), is there one you'd like to try (or try to use more) with students? During which times of the school day? Why?

Chapter Five ■ Reinforcing Language: Seeing Children and Naming Their Strengths

1. This chapter emphasizes the importance of closely observing students so that you can use personalized reinforcing language to "mirror back . . . their strengths and positive actions" (p. 89). What are some ways to do that observing that might work well for your schedule, classroom, students, and teaching style?

2. Review the author's discussion about the importance of emphasizing what children do well versus your personal approval of their actions and accomplishments (pp. 96–98). Do you think you would find it easy or hard to use this type of specific and objective reinforcing language? Why?

3. Reflect on your use of "Thank you" with students. When and why do you use the term? In what situations do you feel "Thank you" supports students' growth?

4. ———————————————— S C E N A R I O ————————————————

   You have a class full of chatty students who have struggled to control their impulsive talking since the first day of school. Now it's November. With patient teaching and lots of practice, they're doing much better, but sometimes they're still talking too much when they shouldn't be.

   The author talks about ways to encourage students who are still working on fully meeting expectations. Take another look at "Naming Concrete Behaviors" (pp. 94–95) and "Find Positives to Name in All Children" (p. 100). What are some examples of reinforcing language you could use to help your chatty students along?

5. What are some ways that you could increase your use of reinforcing language?

Chapter Six ▪ Reminding Language: Helping Students Remember Expectations

1. In your current classroom practice, when and how do you help students remember expectations? How are your practices similar to or different from the kind of reminding language this chapter discusses?

2. Thinking about the author's advice about proactive reminders (those given before a potentially challenging situation), which aspects do you think would come easily for you? Which might be challenging? What about reactive reminders (those given just as students are beginning to go off track)? How could you support yourself in meeting any challenges you foresee?

3. ———————— S C E N A R I O ————————

A teacher walking with a class down the hall says to them, "Now, everyone, I'm noticing that this line is getting raggedy and you're also turning around and talking to each other too loudly, even though you know we're supposed to be quiet so other students can get their work done. I want everyone to stop right now and take a chill pill, and then I want you to remember how we're supposed to walk in the hall."

What are some ways to recraft this language into an effective reminder?

4. The author believes that teachers need "to deal with our anger in ways that don't undermine respectful and trusting relationships with students" (p. 121). Of the five tips she then gives for getting through a heated moment in a way that keeps everyone in the class emotionally safe, which ones especially resonate with you? Why?

Chapter Seven ▪ Redirecting Language: Giving Clear Instructions When Children Have Gone Off Track

1. Page 130 lists five points to remember about using redirecting language. Which of these do you think will feel easy and natural to you? Which might you find challenging? What would make your learning easier?

2. ———————————— S C E N A R I O ————————————

The class has worked for a couple of weeks on science projects in which each student researched the habitat and characteristics of a favorite animal. Now students are making brief presentations to their classmates. A group of younger children and a few parents are in the audience as well. In the excitement, a few of your students forget what they've learned about being respectful audience members and start firing questions before the speaker has finished.

Without embarrassing or shaming students, how could you address this situation so that the presentations can continue in a respectful way?

3. On page 137, the author points out that if children don't follow our redirection even when it was given clearly, we need to step in with a logical consequence appropriate to what was going on. Think of a situation in which you gave a student a redirection but he or she didn't follow it. What did you do? If you used a logical consequence, how did it work out?

4. In summing up redirecting language, the author notes that it "tells students respectfully, directly, and specifically what to do" (p. 141). As you think about those characteristics—respectful, direct, specific—which one seems to you to present the most exciting opportunities for improving your teaching practice?