

Choice Words

*How Our Language Affects
Children's Learning*

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Contents

<i>Foreword by Richard Allington</i>	v
Chapter 1 The Language of Influence in Teaching	1
Chapter 2 Noticing and Naming	11
Chapter 3 Identity	23
Chapter 4 Agency and Becoming Strategic	31
Chapter 5 Flexibility and Transfer (or Generalising)	45
Chapter 6 Knowing	55
Chapter 7 An Evolutionary, Democratic Learning Community	67
Chapter 8 Who Do You Think You're Talking To?	79
<i>Appendix A: The Fine Print</i>	93
<i>Appendix B: Four Year 4 Students</i>	98
<i>Appendix C: Analysis of Debbie Miller's Interaction with the Class and Brendan</i>	103
<i>References</i>	105

The Language of Influence in Teaching

When I was in Year 4, my teacher turned to me in response to one of my transgressions and said with relish, “By the gods, thou art a scurvy knave. Verily I shall bonce thee on thine evil sconce.” An observer might have chuckled and forgotten this brief and trivial event. Its genius is easily missed. My teacher’s playful use of language got my attention, stopping the inappropriate behaviour, but at the same time it took the edge off the rebuke by making it playful, leaving my dignity intact (showing that he cared) and it showed me how valuable and interesting language can be – valuable enough to play with, powerful enough to change behaviour without force. He also showed the possibilities for adopting other voices, drawing language from other sources, while incidentally reminding us of a topic we had studied in humanities and social sciences. It would be foolish to argue that this single event is the reason I use language as I do in my learning, thinking, teaching and social life. It would be less foolish, I think, to point to it as an example of a conversational current that left its mark on my social and intellectual being. As with most of the teachers it has been my privilege to study, I doubt that my Year 4 teacher was aware of the implications of how he used language. He was just good at using it in ways that assisted our learning. Some of us have to think more carefully about the language we use to offer our students the best learning environment we can.

Recently, my colleagues and I had the privilege of studying how successful literacy teachers work their magic in the classroom (Allington and Johnston 2002b). We selected these teachers as successful both because their students did well on conventional literacy tests and because people who were familiar with their work recommended them, aspired to be like them or wished to have them teach their children. Each was excellent in their own way and each had areas with which they struggled, just like the rest of us. I became particularly interested in the powerful and subtle ways these teachers used language and began to explore its significance. In this book I focus on those things teachers say (and don't say) whose combined effect changes the literate lives of their students. I use examples of apparently ordinary words, phrases and uses of language that are pivotal in the orchestration of the classroom. I drew my examples initially from the teachers in our study and I have added examples from the work of other researchers and from my own experience to elaborate certain points.

My initial interest was in how teachers' use of language might explain their students' success in becoming literate, as documented on literacy tests. However, I frequently watched teachers accomplish remarkable things with their students and at the end of the day express guilt about their failure to accomplish some part of the curriculum. This guilt was, in my view, both unfounded and unproductive. It was caused, in part, by the teachers' inability to name all the things they *did* accomplish. Consequently, my second goal with this book is to reduce this guilt by showing the complex learning that teachers produce that is not recognised by tests, policy makers, the general public, and often even by teachers themselves, but that is particularly important.

If we have learned anything from Vygotsky (1978), it is that "children grow into the intellectual life around them" (p. 88). That intellectual life is fundamentally social and language has a special place in it. Because the intellectual life is social, it is also relational and emotional. To me, the most humbling part of observing accomplished teachers is seeing the subtle ways in which they build healthy learning communities – intellectual environments that produce not mere technical competence, but caring, secure, actively literate human beings. Observing these teachers accomplish both goals convinced me that the two achievements are not completely at odds.

Some years ago, I read Mary Rose O'Reilley's *The Peaceable Classroom*. Early in the book she observes, "I had gone off to be a

❁ **“Did anyone notice ... ?”**

Part of inviting children to notice is helping them see what kind of things might be noticed and to name the things being noticed. For example, Did anyone *notice* ... any interesting words? ... any new punctuation? ... any words that are a bit alike? ... any new ways of arranging words on the page? They can also benefit by attending to their own behaviour as they are invited to in, Did anyone *try* ... some new words they liked? ... some new punctuation? ... a different kind of writing? ... a different kind of reading? Did anyone ... create a new character? The idea in such questions is to normalise the practice of trying out new possibilities – stretching beyond what one already controls. To notice – to become aware of – the possible things to observe about the literate world, about oneself and about others can open conversations among students who are noticing different things.

❁ **“I see you know how to spell the beginning of that word.”**

When a child has spelled *farm* as *fo*, what is to be said? The most important piece is to confirm what has been successful (so it will be repeated) and simultaneously assert the learner’s competence so they will have the confidence to consider new learning. Marie Clay (1993) refers to this as attending to the “partially correct”. Its significance cannot be overstated.

Focusing on the positive is hardly a new idea. It is just hard to remember to do it sometimes, particularly when the child’s response is nowhere near what you expected. Indeed, the more we rely on expectations and standards, the harder it is to focus on what is going well. I recall being asked once what a Year 3 student’s spelling *should* be like and wondering how knowing that might help or (more likely) hinder someone’s teaching. Certainly, teaching to normative expectations will mean lots of positive feedback for some students (but not necessarily any new learning) and lots of negative feedback for others. Much more important is noticing – and helping the students notice – what they are doing well, particularly the leading edge of what is going well. This leading edge is where the student has reached beyond themselves, stretching what they know just beyond its limit, producing something that is partly correct. This is the launching pad for new learning.

Noticing *first* the part that is correct, or makes sense, is a perceptual bias we need to extend to students. For example, if we ask a student to find a word in their writing that is not quite right and then to mark

the piece in it that is right, we can ask them to explore other ways of spelling the part that is not quite right, isolating the problem. We can apply the same principle to a wide range of social and literate practices, such as analysing group learning processes (as we shall see). I cannot overemphasise the importance of this discursive practice. Children with a solid sense of well-being are less likely to tell stories containing references to negative consequences or negative feeling (Eder 1994). Socialising children's attention to where they are being successful is also likely to develop their sense of self-efficacy (Bandura 1996) or what is increasingly called "agency" (see Chapter 4).

❁ ***“Remember the first week when we had to really work at walking quietly? Now you guys do it automatically” (Day 2002, p. 105).***

Often teachers draw children's attention to their learning histories. Showing children that they have changed as community members, learners, readers and writers reveals that they are in the process of becoming. This category of questions includes ones such as, "How have you changed as a writer?" and "What do you think you need to work on next?" The advantage of drawing attention to change in learning and behaviour is that children can then project learning futures. As we shall see in the next chapter, once children have a sense that they are constantly learning and are presented with evidence of that learning, teachers can ask not only about the detail of their learning histories, but about the detail of their learning futures and the plans they have for managing those learning futures.

❁ ***“What kind of text is this?”***

Asking students to classify a text implies that there are other kinds of text to notice. It opens a conversation about classifying things, including articulating the logic of the classification. For example, you might ask how particular texts are alike or different: "Have you read any other texts like this?", "What is a different text that is on this same theme?" Indeed, Kim Duhamel asked her students to think about what kind of book they were reading and to "sort yourselves by genre" (Ivey 2002, p. 67), a request that led to discussions of different genre and negotiation of genre boundaries and an expansion of everyone's understanding of the structure of texts.

Identity

At the same time that the children were using the stories to proclaim their identity as boys and “tough kids”, those stories were also, in a sense, claiming them. That is, the boys were adopting dominant cultural storylines about how tough kids talk.

Dyson and Genishi 1994, p. 4

Discussing different authors in his class, Steven observes, “For the funny part, Jessie is really funny. He writes a lot about fantasy stuff ... Ron’s a pretty good writer ... and he’s a little better at drawing than writing ... Emily [in her mystery] gave details. She described the characters. It was a really good mystery because it had a point and it had something that the reader had to figure out” (Johnston, Bennett and Cronin 2002b, p. 195). In the course of his comments, Steven identifies himself and his peers as authors in the same breath and terms as he talks about the authors of the commercial books they read. His teacher has arranged classroom conversations in which he will develop his understanding of what authors do and further consolidate and elaborate his identity as an author. At the same time, because he sees his peers as a diverse group of authors and treats them as such, he further consolidates their identities as competent and varied authors. Children in our classrooms are *becoming* literate. They are not simply learning the skills of literacy. They are developing personal and social identities – unique characteristics and affiliations that define the people they see themselves becoming.

This strategy of arranging for a student to figure something out independently, without full awareness, and then reflecting on it, has been called “revealing”. Courtney Cazden (1992) contrasts this with “telling”, in which the teacher is explicit up front and then the student practises what they have been taught to do by someone else. I suspect that revealing is more difficult than telling because it requires taking into account the child’s current understanding. Its benefit is that the child actually does the constructing or problem-solving, which, again, makes possible the development of a sense of agency. Telling, on the other hand, produces metacognitive awareness, which is often quite useful. However, the metacognitive awareness that comes from telling is not always immediately useful. As Clay (2001) points out, “Most things we do as readers need to operate below the conscious level most of the time so that fast and effective processing of the print is achieved and attention is paid to the messages rather than to the work done to get to the message” (p. 127).

The side benefit of the “How did you ... ?” question is that as children articulate their strategic action, they teach their strategies to other students without the teacher being the authoritative-source-from-which-all-knowledge-comes. It arranges for instruction without hierarchical positioning. Naturalising this sort of conversation opens the possibility that students will continue such conversations among themselves, thus increasing the level of “explicit” instruction without increasing the extent to which children are being told what to do.

“Sounds good”, you might say. “So how do we increase the opportunities to have this sort of conversation?” That’s where the next question comes in. To set up agentive narratives, children have to face problems.

❁ *“What problems did you come across today?”*

When asked as a predictable question this implies that it is normal to encounter problems. Everybody does. This, in turn, makes it normal to talk about confronting and solving those problems. It also helps students identify problems and view them as places to learn and it sets up the possibility of asking, “How did you solve that problem?” as an invitation to construct an agentive narrative. We can also expand the conversation to “Has anyone else had that problem? How did you solve it?”, “How else could we solve it?” and “This is what I do when I have that problem”, each of which further expands the agentive possibilities. Of course it is possible for children to answer that they asked someone else how

to solve the problem. However, this can be retold asserting the agency of having done so and the need to remember what was learned, before inviting consideration of other options when that one is not available. "Asking someone is a good way to solve a problem; then we know how to solve it ourselves next time. What other strategies could we use?"

Prompts that help children internalise these options will also make them more portable. For example, when a child encounters a problem, asking, "What can you do?" has several benefits. It reminds the student of her agency – "I can do something" – and asks for an exploration of possibilities without actually insisting that they be tried. It is a very different prompt from "Sound it out" or "What would make sense there?" in that it requires the child to be in control of the exploration and selection of strategies, not just the exercise of them. This is part of teaching towards the development of "inner control", freeing the strategy use from the teacher's support (Clay 1991).

❁ ***"How are you planning to go about this?"***

Planning means organising for a productive narrative. It is the most conscious part of being strategic because it happens before we get into the middle of things. It is a very agentive thing to do. Notice that the way this particular question is asked assumes that the student already has a plan. Some students, not having a plan or even having considered the possibility of planning, find the question slightly puzzling, but generate a possible plan and begin thinking about what it would take to enact it. However, planning is not always approached as directly as this. For example, "We need to check our science experiments and our maths today. How much time do you think you'll need to finish editing your letters?" This at once models planning – planning is something we do all the time in this class – it gives the children choice over their use of time (although not over what needs to be done) and it requires them to mentally engage in the task analysis that is essential to planning. It really invites them to co-construct a plan for the rest of the afternoon. Planning is imagining a possible agentive narrative that can later be rehearsed through the "How did you ... ?" and "Did your plan help you?" questions or in between with, "How are you doing with your plans to ... ?"

❁ ***"Where are you going with this piece [of writing]?"***

This question, like the previous one, is about planning and is forceful because there is no way to answer it simply without accepting the

❁ **“One of the things people do when they start a story is think of what they know. Mathematicians do this too ... Let’s try it.” (Allington and Johnston 2002a, p. 180).**

Reminding children to begin a new activity by taking stock of what they already know (in current mechanistic terms “activating prior knowledge”) has several functions. First, it reduces the magnitude of the problem to be solved. Second, it puts the new problem in the context of old, already-solved problems. Third, it opens the possibility of more connections among the new knowledge and what is already known. However, this particular invitation takes a couple of extra steps. It represents the kind of problems readers face as similar to those that mathematicians face, encouraging active transfer of a strategy across what would otherwise have seemed to be quite different activities. The ability to solve new problems flexibly depends on how the problem is viewed in the first place – whether the strategic demands are seen as similar to other, familiar problems (Kuhn et al. 1995). The invitation encourages children to increase the boundaries within which they look for problem similarities, stretching beyond the surface structure of activities to more metaphorical levels. The “let’s” is also important in this regard. Collaborative problem-solving helps break down the boundaries between different tasks because a collaborator can bring a different perspective to a problem, re-framing it so that it is more like a familiar one. More on this later.

❁ **“How else ...”**

It is wonderful when a child solves a problem. We can then ask them to regale us with the story of how they solved it, building their sense of agency. After having done that is the perfect time to ask how *else* they might have solved it. Doing so sustains the possibility of choice (and thus agency) while maintaining a sense of flexibility – there’s always another way. Even with less successful experiences it is possible, after pointing to what went well, to consider options with questions such as, “Is there anything you might do differently?” which emphasises choice retrospectively – like revising and editing. Such questions are a bit more risky, though. They require a secure relationship within which exploration of past decisions is interesting and not grounds for blame.

Else is a very powerful word. It simultaneously builds flexibility and implies a range of other important messages. For example, “How else could the author have said that?” not only builds a flexible approach but