Talking Effectively with Students

Based on
Inviting Students to Learn:
100 Tips for Talking Effectively with Your Students
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Some of the Many Studies and Writings on the Importance of Language

• Students who had dropped out of high school and completed a GED diploma reported that they had longed for teachers to care about them and to express that caring. They “remembered comments from teachers that were received as subtly denigrating . . . Often students could point to a single comment from teachers that had made a difference in their lives” (p. 313). “Our participants were crying out for a kind word from a teacher” (Golden, Kist, Trehan, & Padak, 2005, p. 315).

• According to Stouthard and Peetsma (1999), when students are focused on the future, they are more motivated and will work harder to accomplish their goals.

• Brown and Jones (2004) found that “consistent with the results of prior investigations, African American students with high levels of future orientation tended to also have higher grades” (p. 266). “The results support viewing a strong future orientation as an important resilience factor with respect to academic achievement. This study joins a number of others that indicate that a strong future orientation is associated not only with higher academic motivation but performance as well” (p. 267).

• Howard and Johnson (2000) found that teachers and students discussed the importance of teachers providing relationships of support and caring, which made the difference between students with difficult lives who succeeded and those who didn’t succeed. Successful students also said the teachers taught effectively so they could learn.

• According to Forsyth, Forbes, Scheitler, and Schwade (1998), “teacher talk that is clear and explicit empowers learners, especially struggling readers and writers” (p. 9). Effective teachers provided clear instruction. “Clear instruction does not occur by happenstance but results from a set of instructional actions that teachers use consciously to promote learning” (p. 15).

References
Seven Principles for Using Inviting Language

The seven principles upon which Inviting Students to Learn: 100 Tips for Talking Effectively with Your Students is based are:

1. **Be intentional in every conversation and choose words to use with students in order to help them feel strong, thus enabling them to be successful in what they are doing.**
   As we are intentionally choosing words to use with students, we can help them to feel strong. We can ask ourselves, “What might be the best way to respond to this student that will assist the student in learning/growing/feeling good about him/herself?”

2. **State what we are saying positively.**
   If we say, “Don’t think of a green elephant,” students will need to form a picture of a green elephant in order to process what we said. If we say, “Don’t walk on the grass,” they will have “walk on the grass” in their mind and will probably be even more likely to do it! By telling students what we want them to do, as opposed to what we don’t want them to do, we will be pointing them in the direction that we would like for them to go.

3. **Use words that end with “-ing” to help students make videos in their head and see learning and living as ongoing processes.**
   By using words that end with “-ing,” we are helping students to make videos of what we are saying as opposed to having snapshots. They can view what we are saying as an ongoing process. What might be the differences between “We work together” and “We are working together?” What might be the differences between “We will do the project together” and “We will be doing the project together?”
4. Intentionally use numerous positive presuppositions—phrases in which we are communicating that the student is highly capable and will be succeeding in many ways, both now and in the future.

Everything we say contains presuppositions. When we ask, “Did you have fun last night,” we are presupposing that the person with whom we are talking did something last night. We might say, “As a student who likes to do a good job, what might be some of the ways you are applying that in this paper?”

5. Assist students in going into the future and looking back, having already been highly successful in all that they plan on doing.

We can assist students in going into the future, looking back at the what they have been doing in the process of completing their assignments, learning things, etc. They will be seeing things differently from the future, looking back, than from the present, looking forward. “Going into the future, looking back, what were some of the steps you were taking in the process of completing the paper?”

“Now, coming back to the present, what might be some of the first steps that you will be taking as you are completing the paper?”

6. Help students realize that when they are thinking negative thoughts about their abilities, their thoughts are only perceptions at that moment in time and are subject to change.

We can teach students that when they are thinking negative thoughts about their abilities, their thoughts are only perceptions. We can invite them to choose other interpretations and look at other options.

7. Let students know that they have complete choice in the ways that they feel and react in any situation.

We are all free to choose how we interpret any situation. For example, if it is raining, we might say, “How terrible! What a dreary day!” We also have the choice of saying, “How wonderful! The flowers need the rain!” However we choose to interpret any situation is only one choice among many! We can teach that to our students.

Please jot down the names of several students on whom to focus as we are talking about the language tips.
How to Use the Two Types of Voices—Credible and Approachable

Use a Credible Voice When You Want to Convey Credibility

Credible Voice—palms down, chin is flat and drops at the end of the phrase or sentence, voice is flat and goes down at the end—use when sending information—conveys credibility

Use an Approachable Voice When You Want to Convey Approachability

Approachable Voice—palms up, chin goes up and down, voice goes up and down—use when asking for information—conveys approachability (www.michaelgrinder.com)

How to Use Language to Build Relationships with Students

Say, “Someone Said . . . .”

We can tell students compliments that others paid them. The more specific we can be, the better. “Mrs. ____ said that you were walking down the hall quietly.” “Mr. Jones said he was really enjoying working with you.” They may discount what we said; however, they will need to accept what others said.

Point Out Students’ Strengths

We are in a wonderful position to see students’ strengths. By pointing them out to students, they will be able to feel good about them and build on them. Often, it only takes on person to say, “You really have a talent as an artist.” As adults, we choose our careers based on our strengths. Our students will do the same.

Use Tag Questions

We can use tag questions at the end of our questions to get students to agree with what we say. “You are really working hard, aren’t you?”
“You completed the assignment quickly, didn’t you?” “You really understand this material, don’t you?” By presupposing that they agree with what we said, they will have a better chance of doing so.

**Say, “Noticed”**

We all like for people to notice things about us. We can build relationships with students by noticing things about them. “Noticed you really enjoy singing.” “Noticed you are making friends quickly and easily.” “Noticed that you helped your friend this afternoon.”

**Use “We,” “Us,” and “Our” Rather Than “You” and “I”**

By using “we,” “us,” and “our” as opposed to “you” and “I,” we will be creating an inclusive organization. “We are all in this together!”

**Use Positive Words**

Students like to hear positive words, such as “happiness,” “opportunities,” “challenges,” “options,” “choices,” “resources,” “moving forward,” “potential,” “effective,” “exploring,” “joyful,” etc. We can avoid using words such as “bad,” “difficult,” “hard,” “failure,” “limitations,” “no,” “overwhelmed,” “problem,” “wrong,” etc.


When we ask students to tell us why they were successful, we are asking them to attribute their success to working hard. This also helps them to learn a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset, which is the work of Carol Dweck. Then, when we way, “Bet you are feeling good about that,” we are inviting them to own their successes. Often, adults say, “I am so proud of you.” Students learn that when they work hard, the adults get to feel proud. By inviting students to feel good about what they did, we are helping them to feel pride in what they accomplished.
How to Use Language to Teach Students

Help Students to Feel Smart
We can only learn what we almost know. By pre-teaching lessons before we actually teach them, we are helping students to feel smart. We can introduce key concepts to students the day before we will formally introduce a topic. By doing so, the students will feel smart because they will already know what we are talking about!

Set High Expectations
When teachers have high expectations of students, they will strive to measure up. By setting high expectations for students and communicating them, students will achieve far more than we ever dreamed they could achieve!

We can use these tiny words to help students realize that they can learn and achieve—it is only a matter of time. “I can’t do this!” “Yet!” “This is really hard for me!” “Until now!” “I’m having trouble with this!” “But not for long!”

Point Out the Way Students Are Growing
We can help students feel competent at what they are learning by pointing out their areas of growth. “Wow! Last week, you were just starting to learn this skill. Now, you are doing it quickly and easily!”

Talk About Making Things Even Better
When we say that students are doing better, we are implying that what they have been doing previously has not been good. By saying that they are doing even better, we are honoring what students did in the past.

Talk About Refining Rather Than Improving
When we ask student to improve what they did, we are suggesting that what they did before was not great. When we ask them to refine
what they did, we are suggesting that what they did was fine. They are just refining it!

Ask Questions
When we ask questions, we are setting a direction for our students. The brain automatically goes to work to answer questions. They can be even more powerful than statements. “What will you be doing today in the process of completing your work?”

How to Use Language to Influence Students

Use Words That Imply That the Student is Doing What We Would Like for Him/Her to Do
We can use the following words to presuppose that students are doing what we are asking them to do. We are also linking the action with the outcome.
“As you are playing football, you are greatly improving your skills!”
“Since you are listening to a story, you are learning even more!”
“After you have completed this problem, you will be teaching others!”
“Because you are studying, you are going to be doing well on the test!”
“By reading, you are increasing your knowledge!”

Use Verb Tenses to Strategically Put Changes in the Past
We can use this language pattern to assist students in putting what they had previously done in the past and moving forward. “We have this situation.” “We had this situation.” “We had that situation.” “We have had that situation.” “We had had that situation.” . . . “We are concerned about this.” “We were concerned about that.” “We have been concerned about that.” “We had been concerned about that.” Each verb tense, as well as the use of “that” instead of “this,” puts it farther away in the past.
Use “And” and “Yet” Rather than “But”
“You did a nice job, but . . . .” What does this imply? People tend to negate what people said before the “but.” Instead, we might say, “You did a nice job, and . . . .”

Say, “You Are the Type of Student Who . . . .”
We can presuppose positive things about our students by telling them positive things about themselves. What if someone said, “You are the type of teacher who cares deeply about her/his students.” We might say, “You are the type of student who seeks excellence in everything he does!” “You are the type of student who has many friends!”

Invite Students to Become Someone Else
Students have many heroes. If a student is stuck, we can ask, “What might ___________ do in this situation?” “If you were ____________, what might you do?”

Give Students Positive Identities
We can give students positive identities to emphasize their strengths by saying, “You are __________.” “You are an artist.” “You are a mathematician.” “You are a biologist.”

Change Students’ Expressions of Negative Identities to Behaviors
Sometimes, students have internalized negative identities, such as, “I am bad,” “I am dumb,” etc. We can change them into behaviors. “You just made a decision quickly without thinking.” “You hadn’t yet studied for the test.”

Align with Students’ Belief Systems
It is important for us to point out concrete, true, facts about students that they must agree with and cannot dispute. If a student has a low self-concept of him/herself as a learner and we say, “You are a good student,” the student might intentionally mess up to prove that he/she is right and we are wrong. This is called “cognitive dissonance.” By pointing out concrete things that a student has done, the student will
need to accept them as true. “You completed the paper in 10 minutes.” The student must agree.

How to Use Inviting Language in Different Contexts

In addition to using these language patterns with students, we can also use them with a variety of people. We can use these language patterns when:

Talking with Parents
We can use these strategies when talking with parents. We can talk about their child, and we can talk about them.

Writing Notes for Students and Parents
We can incorporate these language patterns into the notes that we are writing to parents and students. Especially in this day of e-mail, students may treasure positive notes that we leave on their desk.

Talking with Colleagues
While we are talking with colleagues, we can use these language patterns. Hopefully, they will model us and use them with their students.

Writing E-mails
We can also use these strategies in the e-mails that we write to our students’ parents. We can build up the students, and we can state what we are saying in a positive manner. Students can come to school the next day saying, “You sent an e-mail to my mother about what I did well yesterday!”

Writing Report Cards
By incorporating these language tips into what we write on report cards, we can help students to grow, learn, and feel good about themselves.
Please Jot Down:

Three language tips to use with my students:

1. 
2. 
3. 

Two new ideas:

1. 
2. 

One question to contemplate:

1.