

Reinforcing, Reminding, and Redirecting

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Language—our words, tone of voice, and pacing— is one of the most powerful tools available to teachers. It permeates every aspect of teaching and learning. We cannot engage children in learning, welcome a student into the room, or handle a classroom conflict without using words. Students cannot do a science observation or a reading assignment without listening to and interpreting their teacher’s words. And what they hear and interpret—the message they get from their teacher—has a huge impact on how they think and act, and ultimately how they learn.

In this age of the Common Core, when students are being challenged with rigorous standards, it’s vitally important for teachers to use language deliberately, as a tool to support children’s learning. Skillful communication with students will be the linchpin that allows teachers to get the most out of whatever other instructional techniques they use.

One way for teachers to harness the power of their language is to pay attention to the “3 Rs”—reinforcing language, reminding language, and redirecting language—that are part of the *Responsive Classroom* approach to teacher language.

Reinforcing Language

Children build on their strengths, not their weaknesses. This is one of the most important things to keep in mind when teaching. It’s vital for teachers to see and name what students are doing well, and reinforcing language allows us to do that. It highlights students’ skills, positive efforts and attitudes, and quality work so that they know what to stand on as they reach for the next higher rung in their learning.

It can take time to shift your language to focus more on what students are doing well than on what they need to improve. But once you’ve gotten comfortable with this powerful tool, you’ll find yourself consistently acknowledging students’ positives.

Keys to Effective Reinforcing Language

Name concrete and specific behaviors. Rather than saying a global “Good job!” or “Nice work,” tell students what they specifically did well so they know what to keep doing and build upon.

- **Instead of:** “Your spelling shows progress.”
- **Try:** “You remembered to change the ‘y’ to ‘i’ when adding ‘ed.’ ”

De-emphasize your personal approval. Emphasize what the student did. Otherwise, students may focus more on pleasing you than on improving their skills.

- **Instead of:** “I’m so pleased with the way you added key details to your main point.”
- **Try:** “You added key details to your main point. That helps your audience understand and be persuaded.”

Avoid holding one student up as an example for others. The student held up may feel triumphant, but the others are likely to feel devalued or criticized. And the student held up may even feel embarrassed.

- **Instead of:** “Notice how Glenda used four sources for her research project. Let’s see all of you do that.”
- **Try:** To Glenda privately: “You used at least three sources as we learned to do. That makes your research credible.”

Find positives to reinforce in all students. Every child has strengths. Over time, every child should feel that we see and appreciate their positive actions and attitudes.

- **Instead of:** Using reinforcing language with only the students who do proficient work, are the first to get organized, or are otherwise the “best”
- **Try:** To a student who struggles but made a strong effort: “You read three pages during readers’ workshop today. What helped you concentrate?”

Reminding Language

Just as we all need reminders to stay organized in our everyday lives, children need reminders in school to keep their work and behavior on track. By using reminding language before students start a possibly challenging task, or right when they start to make a mistake, teachers help them stay on task, organized, responsible, and safe.

Before using reminders, be sure to teach students what the expectations are and how to meet them, as children can only be reminded of what they already know. Also, keep in mind that reminders are most effective when both the student and teacher feel calm. That’s why it’s so important to give reminders early, before students’ behavior has gone on long enough for frustration to build.

Keys to Effective Reminding Language

Prompt children to remember for themselves what they should be doing. This shows faith in their competence and builds their autonomy.

- **Instead of:** “Sit alone or next to someone you won’t be tempted to talk to. Put away everything you don’t need. If your mind wanders, take a few deep breaths and tell your mind to come back to your reading.”
- **Try:** “Think about what you can do to help yourself concentrate.”

Use neutral tone and body language. Giving a reminder as a matter-of-fact piece of guidance shows respect for the student. It also helps her focus on what she needs to do rather than on what we think of her.

- **Instead of:** “What did we say is the next step in making these kinds of graphs?” said with a singsong voice, arms crossed, and rolling eyes. (Even if meant to be humorous, implies the student isn’t very smart.)
- **Try:** “What did we say is the next step in making these kinds of graphs?” said with a matter-of-fact voice, neutral body position, and a neutral gaze. (Implies student can remember and directs his attention to doing so.)

Be brief. Students tend to tune out of long strings of words.

- **Instead of:** “I’m hearing people starting to sound disrespectful when they disagree. Everyone, remember to say ‘I hear your point, but I have a different idea’ or ask a clarifying question the way we learned. If we interrupt and say things like ‘No, that’s not true,’ or ‘You’re wrong,’ we’ll shut down discussion.”
- **Try:** “What did we learn about disagreeing honestly and respectfully?”

Watch for follow-through. After giving a reminder, take a moment to see if the child acts. If we don’t do this, children may learn that we don’t mean what we say.

- **Instead of:** Giving a reminder and then turning away immediately to tend to something else
- **Try:** Watching, and then acknowledging the child’s action with a nod or a smile. No words are needed.

Redirecting Language

A third grade class is working on an art project. Macy waves her scissors in the air, the point coming perilously close to a tablemate’s face. Down the hall, a class of fifth graders is doing some science experiments when a small group starts playing games with the materials, games that quickly have the children laughing and scuttling about, the science experiment completely forgotten.

When students are doing something harmful to themselves or others, are too far into a mistake to correct themselves, or are too emotional to think reasonably about what they’re supposed to be doing, teachers need to redirect them with clear words. Skillfully used, redirecting language lets teachers provide wise external control to keep children safe and productive when their self-control is failing them.

As with reminding language, it’s important to be brief and to use a neutral tone and neutral body language when giving a redirection. Here are other essentials to keep in mind.

Keys to Effective Redirecting Language

Be direct and specific. When children are far enough into a mistake to need a redirection, they need to hear exactly what you want them to do differently.

- **Instead of:** “Casey, you need to work harder.”

- **Try:** “Casey, put your watch away and continue with your assignment right now.”

Say what to do, instead of what not to do. Saying what not to do may sound like a complaint or an attack on students’ character, and many students may miss what we’re wanting them to do. Naming the desired behavior is clear and respectful of children.

- **Instead of:** “Class, stop wasting everyone’s time.”
- **Try:** “Freeze. Everyone return to your seat with your folder. Then we’ll start.”

State a redirection as a statement, not a question. A question gives the illusion of choice and can confuse children. It’s more respectful to calmly give a statement that tells children exactly what we want them to do.

Instead of: “Anna, could you refocus on your math?”

Try: “Anna, refocus on your math.”

Follow up with action if necessary. Watch to see if the student follows your redirection. If not, give a clearer redirection or take action that helps her return to positive behavior.

- **Instead of:** Redirecting Anna and then turning away immediately to tend to something else
- **Try:** Directing Anna to move to a seat close to you (if sitting near classmates seemed to be pulling her off task).
or
Directing Anna to “take a break” (take a positive time-out) in a place away from the action so she can regain her focus.

Pick an R and Start Practicing

Changing our language can be challenging. It helps to take it one step at a time. Choose one aspect of teacher language described above, whichever speaks to you the most, and work on that aspect. When you’ve made progress, take on one more change. In time, your new language will feel more natural. Sticking to it brings great rewards—for you, and more importantly, for your students.

When used effectively, teacher language can positively influence achievement and classroom management. As a classroom teacher with 30 years’ experience, I urge you to buy *The Power of Our Words*. It will enhance your classroom environment in ways you never dreamed possible!”
—Seema Gersten