



It's All in the Interpretation: The Role of Linguistic Influence in the Classroom

Introduction

Years ago, I worked for a well-known entertainment corporation in business operations. It was a positive experience, and I often find myself reflecting on what made it so positive. Over time, I've come to recognize that a lot of the positivity was created by the language used at the organization.

Years later, I am similarly considering the function of language in the classroom environment, especially as it relates to perception. As the principle of linguistic relativity states, language shapes our perceptions of reality. In short, language can strongly impact how we perceive experiences in our lives. Language can motivate or demotivate. Language can persuade or dissuade. Language can connect or disconnect. There is so much at stake when communicating with students, and the language used when communicating with them can make a critical difference in how a discipline, a course, or an instructor is perceived.

Following this realization, I began to pay more attention to the words I chose to use in the classroom, as well as those that I heard others using, and it got me wondering: Would a calculated change in classroom language positively influence students' perception of the course, much like it influenced my perspective of a corporate setting so many years ago?

Strategies

The changes to language I use in the classroom have been gradual. The first change involves what I formerly called, "class participation." The term "participation" is often interpreted as raising a hand in class and contributing an original idea or incisive thought to the discussion, actions that can invoke a sense of panic in students. However, when we ask students to "participate," what we are really looking for is proof of students connecting with course material. What we are looking for is engagement. To reflect this reality, I have started using the term "engagement" to cover a broad array of in-class participatory behaviors. The linguistic shift has resulted in students being able to prove that they can make connections with material without feeling that raising their hand and generating original contributions on the spot is the only option.

I have also started to use the phrase "engagement assignment" in place of "homework." In high school, students do homework to avoid getting in trouble with their

parents, and so homework generally carries connotations of long hours spent at a desk or table doing a chore that needs to be completed. Rather than using language that students might relate to earlier or arduous educational experiences, using "engagement assignments" suggests a focus on the content of assignments. The new phrase changes the perception of the task at hand, and it also signposts a symbolic change in educational levels. In college, we engage with material and content. Engaging becomes learning.

Once I adjusted to incorporating the term engagement into my vocabulary and the classroom, I tackled another word that I felt had negative connotations for students. Multiple research studies and personal observation support that test anxiety has become more prevalent among college students. Some students' anxiety is palpable as soon as the word "test" is casually thrown out in class. In my classes, tests are weighted less heavily than projects and still students worry more about their test grades over grades for other projects. In an attempt to get students more comfortable with the idea of testing, initially I explained what it meant to have a fixed versus growth mindset. Though this helped to ease some students' minds, it was not the panacea I had hoped for. I now refer to tests as "Knowledge Celebrations" because students should celebrate the knowledge they have acquired during specific points in the semester. Though I still assign grades, I position marks on Knowledge Celebrations as a positive moment, a time to look at a student's work and say, "Look at all you know about the course content!" Students do buy into this outlook and new phrase, and will even correct themselves when asking me questions about the "test...oh wait, Knowledge Celebration..." in class.

Finally, students' past experiences with group projects can be overwhelmingly negative. As a way to make group work more palatable, I revised the phrase "group projects" to become "collaborative projects." Using the word "collaborative" suggests that the project is one in which they engage. When I task them with "collaborating," it indicates that I expect there to be equitable contributions among all participants, and it is also a more professional term that mirrors the workplace and real behavior that is expected from those in the workforce.

Conclusions

If we ultimately aim to inform and engage our students, then we must be mindful of the language we use to connect with students. Most of my students genuinely enjoy coming to class, and I believe that my linguistic choices have a lot to do with their positive experiences. Students

have noticed the change in language. For example, during an in-class presentation one student articulated how much he liked the change in vocabulary. He said it made tests less intimidating and homework more meaningful, and it was the simple change in language that changed how he perceived these activities. Though some students poke fun at calling tests “celebrations” and we even laugh about it a little bit together, the phrase is a great way to remind students about what they have learned and their progress in the course. In turn, I notice that my students start to place less emphasis on “grades” and more on their progress.

Thanks to my (now retired) mentor, I am an ardent supporter of building community in my classes. For years my mentor told me that the first step to teaching is to make the classroom a place where students want to be. Without accomplishing that first step, he said, students won’t be able to engage in maximal learning. I have found this to be true. So I work hard to prioritize building a positive environment in my classrooms. Language is one of the many variables that can help contribute to achieving this positivity. How will you use language to influence your students’ perception of you, your course, and coursework?

Kerri Russo Mercer, *Faculty, Communication*

For more information, contact the author at Wake Technical Community College, 9101 Fayetteville Road, Raleigh, NC 27603. Email: kamercer@waketech.edu