

The language we use

A permeating theme



For further guidance to complement this presentation, please refer to the Teacher Handbook.

It is World Book Day and a headteacher is walking through the school with a colleague who is visiting.

A nine-year-old girl is standing in the corridor by the photocopier, facing towards the approaching headteacher and the visitor. The child appears to be speaking stridently to a support assistant next to her.

As they get closer it becomes clear that the child is addressing her comments to the headteacher. The conversation goes as follows:

"Hello Fallon. Are you okay?" asks the headteacher in an enquiring voice.

"It's your fault!" shouts the child loudly.

"What is my fault?" The headteacher speaks softly.

"You said we couldn't dress up for World Book Day. It's your fault!" The sentence gets louder and more aggressive as Fallon speaks.

"We're not in dressing up clothes today, that is true, but you have made some lovely choices about what you are wearing today. I like the way you're wearing your school cardigan."

Fallon acknowledges the compliment with a shrug and it looks like she is contemplating allowing herself to be distracted, but then comes back loudly with, *"But we can't dress up today!"*

"The learning support assistant who is with Fallon interjects, "Lots of schools aren't doing dressing up today, Fallon."

The headteacher picks up this cue and continues, *"That is true Fallon, but we are doing lots of other lovely things about books today."*

The headteacher smiles as she speaks and with arms relaxed in front of her, she turns her palms towards the child.

"Have you guessed which teachers are the Masked Readers in the video you saw earlier?"

Fallon considers the question she has heard carefully and although she doesn't answer the question her face appears to relax. Suddenly she adds effusively, *"I'm sorry!"*

"What are you sorry for?" asks the headteacher, slightly bemused and unsure of the direction of travel now. She is aware of her visitor, but remains calm in her manner and voice.

"I'm sorry for calling you a pain in the arse!" says Fallon, in a matter-of-fact manner, but clear as a bell.

If she is taken aback, the headteacher doesn't show it. She gives a slight smile around her eyes, maintains a soft expression and a gentle voice and says, *"Well, I accept your apology, Fallon"*.

"Can I have a hug now?" asks the child.

"You can" says the headteacher, as she puts her hand on the child's shoulder, gives a reassuring pat and expertly moves the child towards the classroom door, as the support assistant picks up the momentum and begins to talk about the task they are about to do.

The big idea

Every interaction is an opportunity to:

- Respond
- Develop
- Intervene
- Model
- Teach
- Learn
- Redirect
- Shape
- Share
- Adjust
- Listen
- Understand

Or a chance to:

- Shame
- Control
- Direct
- Alter
- React

Can you add to either list?

Are there situations in which the above interventions may be necessary or productive?

Reflective activity

Go through the corridor conversation once again (the slides are repeated for you, or use the following template).

Consider a parallel reality in which the outcomes may have been very different. Think of negative or unskilled interactions you may have seen to inform your answers:

Pause between each insert of text and consider:

- *How might the adult or child have reacted instead?*
- *What might the consequences of these different reactions have been?*
- *What is the worst outcome that might happen from an escalation of events?*
- *Should it make a difference if you know that the child has an Autistic Spectrum Condition?*

The following slides are a repeat of the scenario slides. Systems like Blackboard or Loom, allow trainees to write on the slides directly with their ideas.

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<p><i>Having heard the earlier version of this corridor interaction, imagine what might happen if the people involved reacted to the behaviours, rather than responding to the need that is being communicated?</i></p>	
<p>"Hello Fallon. Are you okay?" asks the headteacher in an enquiring voice.</p>	
<p>"It's your fault!" shouts the child loudly</p>	
<p>What might happen next?</p>	
<p>"You said we couldn't dress up for World Book Day. It's your fault!" the sentence gets louder and more aggressive as Fallon speaks.</p>	
<p>How might the headteacher respond?</p>	
<p>Fallon comes back loudly with, "But we can't dress up today!"</p>	
<p>What might the learning support assistant do now?</p>	
<p>What might the child do?</p>	
<p>How might the headteacher react?</p>	
<p>Fallon adds effusively, "I'm sorry!"</p>	
<p>"What are you sorry for?" asks the headteacher.</p>	
<p>"I'm sorry for calling you a pain in the arse!" says Fallon, clear as a bell.</p>	
<p>What might the headteacher do or say next?</p>	

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Reflective activity



Think of a patchwork quilt design.

At any point you can change the piece you were thinking of putting into your design and create a different pattern.

In your altered version, are there any points where the situation could still be turned around to achieve a positive outcome for the child?

The language we communicate through our words and our actions is a beacon for the learners we teach.



Are all aspects of your language accessible to the learners in your class?

Reflect on:

- Your grammar – the way you structure your sentences
- Your lexicon – the words you choose to use
- The tones of your voice
- The messages you communicate through your body language
- Your verbal humour
- Your physical humour.

If you always aim to make your language accessible to all learners in your class, that is good practice.

However, there may be groups and aspects you have still not considered, for example:

- *How might a learner with sensory impairments access verbal communication at different times?*
- *How might a visual impairment prevent access to the messages you communicate through body language?*
- *What might prevent a learner who is new to English access verbal humour?*

If the answer to the question in the previous slide is no, it may still be appropriate to use the language and structures you choose.

But now you know that not all learners are accessing the messages you want to communicate, what will you change for the benefit of some of your class?

- *What can you change for the benefit of all of your class?*
- *How can you include this in your planning?*

Critical questions

- *Which learners may not be able to process all the language you use as a teacher, in the way that you use it?*
- *In what ways do you communicate effectively without spoken words?*
- *How do you adjust your language for those who find it easier to process language literally?*
- *When do you teach specific skills relating to communication in your class?*
- *What skills can you teach to learners who find it more difficult to understand the meaning in your communication, or in the communication of their peers?*

Remember...

The more you understand yourself, the better you are able to self-regulate your own emotional reactions to the language around you.

You can notice the language from learners, staff and parents, recognise the effect it *could* have on you.

In being prepared you are able to avoid conflicting feelings and offer a role model of how to use verbal and non-verbal language effectively.

What language evokes a reaction in you?

Click on a button to reveal a possible response

Swearing

Silence

Unkind or
spiteful
comments

Gossiping

Insulting

Arguing
back

Plan and rehearse your own response to situations which may otherwise cause you to show heightened reactions

What language evokes a reaction in you?

Swearing

Calmly follow school procedure

Silence

Affirm that you value the learner's contribution when they feel ready

Unkind or spiteful comments

Calmly seek to repair and restore

Gossiping

Calmly challenge or alter topic

Insulting

Blank facial response and model kind words

Arguing back

Change to a softer tone and distract

Building effective partnerships

Knowing the potential impact, helps you to put up your *emotional forcefield* in a responsive and non-confrontational way.

Learner's goal	Message that may be intended	Potential impact on adult	Indicators	Adult actions might include
To seek undue attention	I only feel I belong if I have your attention.	Annoyed Irritated Worry	Calls out Distracts others Asks lots of questions to which the answers are already known Argues	Specific and positive praise, e.g. 'I liked the tone of voice you used'. 'I will be asking Kai a question next.' 'I would love to hear about that at 11.00, before playtime.'
To gain power	I only feel safe if I am controlling.	Challenged Threatened Overwhelmed	Doesn't back down Hurts others Bullying behaviours Oppositional behaviour	Deescalate through gentle humour, distraction, planned ignoring. Enable the learner to control aspects that s/he can control, e.g type of paper/pen/seat/even timings.
To get revenge	I don't like myself, others don't like me, that's why I've been hurt so I'll hurt others in return.	Disgusted Hurt Disbelief	Aggression to others Talking negatively to peers about the other learner Delayed reaction to a prior incident	Restorative practice, enabling the hurt and those who have been hurt to come to a resolution and repair relationship. Be specific in what aspect of the behaviour was unkind/hurtful, do not leave the learner with the impression that s/he is unkind/hurtful/unpleasant.
To avoid failure	I don't feel I have any value.	Despair Helpless Hopeless Frustrated	Work refusal Being unfocussed Task avoidance – doing other things instead Refusal to talk Not engaging with peers	Positive praise Offer two choices Focus on two positive things the learner has done in the day, before s/he goes home. Role model stillness and calm as a positive form of non-verbal communication.

A version of this chart, adapted from Dreikur's mistaken goals by Jane Nelsen, can be found at www.positivediscipline.com/sites/default/files/mistakengoalchart.pdf

Language beyond a means to communicate need

As a teacher, the language you use and the way that you use your language, is important for all the learners in your class, including those:

- With a hearing impairment
- With receptive language processing needs
- With semantic pragmatic needs (often as part of an autistic spectrum condition)
- Who are new to English
- Who have undeveloped grammatical skills (syntax) in one or more languages
- Who are highly articulate verbally, with less developed emotional language

Food for thought...

...Language is more than a subject to teach. Language serves thinking. It is a cognitive tool for students. It helps them to form concepts, to solve problems, and to communicate

(Blank, 1974; Vygotski, 1998).

Language also serves important purposes in computer-assisted learning, because language is instrumental for information seeking, information presentation, knowledge organization, knowledge integration, and knowledge generation all skills essential to 21st-century learning.

(Robertson et al., 2007)

Don't avoid; just plan for!

Planning for the introduction of new language into the classroom is really important. So often teachers talk without necessarily considering the accessibility of the language they use.

Having high expectations of oracy, including the range of vocabulary to which learners experience, is good teaching, but like any new concept, 'new' needs to be acquired in a range of ways.

What gets your goat?

- This is a good example of language that is only accessible if you understand the meaning within the idiom. Once you know the code of this phrase then it is easy to forget that others have no reference point from which to make meaning.
- Humour can be inaccessible for similar reasons, so use it wisely and explain the joke as well. Some learners will smile at humour in a classroom situation because they are reflecting the social cues of their peers. It can be easy to miss who is really accessing the language you use.
- Rhymes, lyrics and ditties (little repeated sayings) are often enjoyed by learners and help to provide a hook for language extension and learning.
- Sarcasm is always a poor example for learners.



Links to Handbook

Section 1: Understanding your role

- The role of the teacher
- Intersectionality
- The language we use with colleagues

Section 2: Knowledge of the learner

- How we learn
- Pupil voice
- The language we use with families

Section 3: Planning inclusive lessons

- Unconscious and conscious barriers
- The language we use with learners
- Working with Teaching Assistants

Section 4: Creating an inclusive environment

- Barriers to learning and reasonable adjustments
- Supporting learners with sensory needs
- The language learners use

Section 6: Graduated approach

- The graduated approach
- Gathering a holistic understanding of a learner
- Working with the SENCO
- Working with external agencies and specialist teachers

Section 7: Knowledge of the learner

- *See guidance on primary areas of need*

Section 8: Teacher wellbeing

Signposting

- We Are Teachers, Your Words Matter, poster, <https://s18670.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/WeAreTeachers-Your-Words-Matter.pdf>
- Dixon, K, 2018, Seven reasons for teachers to welcome home languages in education, British Council, www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/reasons-for-teachers-to-prioritise-home-languages-in-education
- Sword, R, 2020, Effective communication in the classroom: skills for teachers, <https://www.highspeedtraining.co.uk/hub/communication-skills-for-teachers/>



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