# 3. Classroom Language That Opens Students’ Minds

“When we are teaching, the language we use with our students is our most powerful tool,” say Peter Johnston (University at Albany), Gay Ivey (James Madison University), and Amy Faulkner (Kate Collins Middle School, VA teacher) in this thoughtful *Reading Teacher* article. “The language we use with children influences, among other things, who they think they are, what they think they’re doing, the relationships they have with others, the strategic information available to them in the classroom, and the possibilities available to them for thinking about literacy and their own lives.”

Johnston, Ivey, and Faulkner urge teachers to use words that empower students and get them constantly generating strategies and learning how to work with each other. “When a first-grade teacher says, ‘How did you do that?’ instead of ‘Good boy!’ it is a consequential instructional decision,” they say. “The former will lead to persistence and broader learning, whereas the latter produces the reverse.” Other effective prompts: “Talk to your partner about how you might figure this out” and “Puzzled? That book was Maya’s favorite. I bet she’d love to talk with you about it.”

The authors suggest these discourse principles to work toward the goal of autonomous students:

• *Use open-ended questions*. When teachers frequently ask students what they notice while they are reading and offer their own noticings, students follow suit. “When we ask comprehension questions, we tend to listen for particular answers, either right or wrong, so that we can judge the extent of comprehension,” say Johnston, Ivey, and Faulkner. “Because they invite the prospect of judgment, these types of questions can easily shift the act of reading from something that the student goes about with intention and curiosity to something required and coerced.” They suggest these open-ended prompts when approaching a group of students engaged in reading together: “Catch me up” or “How’s it going?”

• *Listen carefully and genuinely*. “Once a conversation is started, there is no room for set questions,” say the authors. Questions like, “What do you think will happen next?” don’t lead to rich conversations. Better to ask questions that keep students in control of their learning and convey that you’re expecting them to think and you’re interested in their thoughts – for example, “What are you thinking about that?” or “How are you going to figure that out?”

• *Turn students’ attention to process*. Many teachers’ instinct when students do good work is to praise them, but praise turns kids’ attention from engagement with their own goals to pleasing the teacher. Better to ask, “How did you do that?” or “How did you find such great pictures? Talk about that!”

• *Use conversations to model problem-solving*. This conveys the message that problems, including interpersonal conflicts, are expected and are opportunities to learn how to solve them. The best teacher question might be, “What’s the problem?” leading students to describe it rather than start talking about what they think of each other. “Once they’ve solved the problem,” say the authors, “we can turn their attention to how they did it – together.”

• *Develop self-sufficiency*. “[T]elling is usually not the best way to develop independence,” say Johnston, Ivey, and Faulkner. “Because of our long histories in didactic schooling, we often position ourselves as knowledge deliverers.” Better to get students engaged, encourage them to act strategically, and push them to figure things out by themselves.

• *Value effort, self-correction, and persistence*. A teacher might say to two students, “I think it’s just great that you aren’t satisfied with the thinking you’ve done so far, that you want to work harder on it.” Another teacher, speaking to a student who is nervous about presenting a poem to the class, might say, “You’re having a really tough time, and I respect that, but you need to make a decision about whether or not to push yourself.”

• *Make positive language choices*. “On the simplest level, a teacher’s use of ‘we’ as opposed to ‘you all’ when speaking about the whole class inspires a certain kind of relationship and creates space for possibilities.” Another suggestion: use prompts like these to accentuate the positive and steer students toward good solutions: “I see you were trying to…” “I wonder how you could…” and “How else could you…”

• *Structure the classroom for positive outcomes*. “More important than what you say is whether you help students find, and learn how to find, engaging books…” conclude the authors. This involves having a wide range of books on hand and getting students to do frequent talks on the books they love.

“Talking In Class: Remembering What Is Important About Classroom Talk” by Peter Johnston, Gay Ivey, and Amy Faulkner in *The Reading Teacher*, December 2011/January 2012 (Vol. 65, # 4, p. 232-237), <http://www.reading.org>; the authors can be reached at [pjohnston@albany.edu](mailto:pjohnston@albany.edu), [iveymg@jmu.edu](mailto:iveymg@jmu.edu), and [afaulkner@waynesboro.k12.va.us](mailto:afaulkner@waynesboro.k12.va.us).

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