

What One Should Never Say in English Class

A Study of Effective and Ineffective Teacher Talk

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During lunch hour, a teacher complained to her colleagues, "The boy who usually gets my class on task speaking was strangely moody and silent today so the whole class didn't want to talk. It's so hard to teach a conversation class when they won't speak." Later in the afternoon, she brought up the same topic. "You know that boy who I said usually leads the class? I found out what had him silent today. I asked his friend in third class, what the problem was. You would not believe what happened to him. A Japanese professor in first class had scolded and embarrassed him! Listen to this. The professor said, 'I'm ashamed to share your gender.' Isn't that disgusting? No wonder the kid felt moody. I don't think he's... (she leaned forward and whispered) gay, but he is kind of effeminate so maybe..." The other teachers around the table all began to look over their shoulders at the male Japanese teachers across the room, wondering who could have been so politically incorrect and so heartlessly humiliating. I spoke, "Students should never hear such a thing in any kind of class! What kind of teacher talks that way?"

"The teacher was an idiot. Students need to be relaxed and happy to have any good success at learning. Putting stress like that on a student is just idiotic. He was an absolute idiot!" another teacher spoke loudly. A passing teacher heard only the last sentence and replied, "Sounds like some of my students. Several of them are absolute idiots." Again, I spoke, "Teachers shouldn't call students idiots, not to their faces and not behind their backs." I feel strongly that there must be a certain level of respect shown to our students no matter how naughty or lazy or uncooperative they might be in any particular class, and soon most of the teachers around the table came to agree with me. For the rest of the break, we began to confess times that we too have said things in class that we later were sorry to have spoken. "This is the worst test." was one a teacher had said when returning graded tests. "That's a stupid answer." another one admitted having said. "You are the lowest student in this class." confessed another.

After the break we returned to our classes and perhaps all of us were more careful in

how we spoke to our students that day, but it left me wondering if there were other hurtful things I and my colleagues say often that we can become more aware of and I began to do research on how to speak effectively to motivate students.

Library Research

Teachers talk more than students do in many classes (Barker) although in English as a Foreign Language Class the ratio of student talk time is hopefully increasing (Wing). Teachers communicate not only the topic they are teaching, but also "learning procedures, as well as attitudes and perspectives" (Mohr) I wanted to focus not on the attitude toward the subject matter of the lesson but on the teachers' attitude towards the students and I wanted to learn how what the teacher said in class detracted from or enhanced how the students learned (Brophy and Good) and how the students felt about themselves as second language learners and particularly how it encouraged them to speak or not in class.

From the Horse's Mouth

One way to consider respect for students was to let them become engaged in my research as well and I gave little class surveys to my students in several Japanese university English classes asking how they liked various things a teacher might say. Although the exact statistics of their replies will be given in a future research paper, there were. I can mention here, some very significant answers, for example, one hundred per cent of the students chose they would like the class to be opened with a greeting such as "Good morning." accompanied with a smile.

The very first word

The first time I visited a high school class in Japan, as I opened the door, one student leapt to his feet and barked a command. There was a loud rasping of chairs and desks on the wooden floor as all 48 boys in the room hurried to their feet. Then he shouted into the comparative silence "Rei" and all of the similarly dark uniformed students bent automatically at the hips and there was a second cacophony as they returned to their seats. The professor noted my alarm and said, "Is there a problem?" "Oh, dear. I thought this was English class." "It is." "Then they must start the class with English, a simple, 'Good morning, Teacher.'" I replied. The next day I arrived and the seeming sergeant of arms again jumped up and barked, "Stand...bow...greet." And the students gave me a crisp and thunderous, "Good morning, Teacher!" It took several weeks for me to convince them that I wanted them to dispense with the bowing and the noise, to stay seated and to greet me, in response to my greeting, which would vary from "Good morning." to "Hello" to even "Hi." with no fore-planning, and that imperfect, unmatched, and non-simultaneous greetings were fine.

I have heard professors start their class with "I will start now." And thought it would be better to have given a sense of shared community effort with "Shall we start?" I have

heard other professors begin with a loud, "Be quiet." And have thought that my smile and polite, "Good morning." Or "Good afternoon." depending on the time of the class to be equally effective if not more so.

Effective Attendance Taking

After the greeting or calling the students to attention in some way, the teacher often takes attendance by calling out each name from the roll book. I see a value in marking students absent or late (as I have a policy of two late arrivals are equal to an absence and four absences mean automatic failure) and thus doing the roll book early in the 90 minute class period is important, but I admit my favorite classes are those in small schools where students take all their classes together and soon know each others names, so I can look out over the small class, count the heads and say, "Whoa, two students seem to be gone today. Who are they?" and mark my roll-book as the other students call out the students' names and often the reasons like "has a cold" or "has a tennis club tournament". In larger classes and in schools where students don't know each others names, instead of calling a simple Adachi, Aoki... and listening to their "yes", "here" or "*hai*" responses I like to put a one word answer type question on the board and then call out the names for a reply. "What do you like to drink for breakfast?" is such a roll taking question. Students respond "coffee" "tea" "milk" "cappuccino" "orange juice" and students start perking up as they listen to others responses. In low level classes where vocabulary is weak, I might give either/or type questions. "Which do you like best for breakfast, bread or rice?" In extremely large language classes, I like to change the question every dozen students or more so that interest can perk up again, so I might start out with "Do you like baseball or soccer?" switch to "Do you like tennis or badminton?" with a few random "Do you like volleyball or sumo?" thrown in at random. To me a large language class is over thirty members. I realize that in truly large classes teachers who lecture need to save time by having seating charts or taking up attendance sheets, signatures on a list etc. When one has problems in class, such as failure to do homework, one can even work some suggestions into the supposedly innocuous roll-taking with a question such as "What do you think the teacher should do if a student comes unprepared for the discussion today-ask them to leave the class and not come back until they're prepared, give them a lower grade for making their group work harder without them, or throw them out the window?" Although most of the class did indeed reply "throw them out the window" with a laugh, the student who had not prepared and who was indeed leaving his discussion group in the lurch, laughed perhaps in embarrassment relief and never again did so.

The warm up activity

I wouldn't begin to suggest to other teachers what is most effective for the first exercise of their course-some feel that the comfort of the students is raised by the repetition of the same or a similar activity each week, while others swear by variety. Since I often teach

communicative English courses with an emphasis on spoken English and because of my own proclivities and training, I often start classes with a listening exercise clothed in the guise of a story or anecdote. I do know that if I say, "Let me start, by telling you a story..." instead of "We will begin with a listening exercise..." the students smile like kids being told a bedtime story by their moms and lean forward in their desks ready to be entertained, rather than looking as if they are about to be tested by torture as they do in the latter case. Now I may have worked grammar points, pronunciation patterns, or specifically needed lesson vocabulary into my little entertaining story, but the students are apparently unaware of that.

I have even used storytelling to work with class disciplinary problems. Years ago teaching in a girl's high school, I noticed that there was one girl ostracized by everyone, perhaps due to some economic discrepancy or tendency not to wash her hair sufficiently often. Three days in a row, I started my class with a very simplified repetition of the Hans Christian Anderson story of "The Ugly Duckling" and asked "I wonder what that story says for this class? Please write about it in your learning journal." The first day, the girl herself wrote that the story was about her. The second day another single very bright person said it was about the marginal girl...and the third day several other students recognized that it was about the marginal girl and on that day the bright person invited the "duckling" to join her for lunch. I then never told the story again, the ostracized girl soon seemed to become attached to the bright girl's clique and also I might mention began shampooing her hair daily.

Framing the Lecture Content

Richard Bolstad, world-renowned trainer of neurolinguistic programming has adapted therapeutic psychologist, Erickson's language patterns into phrases teachers can express to students with any content of any training or course work. The classification by Erickson is on the Left and the example frame is on the right below:

Mind Reading	You probably know more than anyone how important...
Lost Performative	And it's a good thing to review your learning regularly.
Cause and Effect	We'll have fun learning today because this is all new information.
Complex Equivalence	If you're listening to this, then you're already learning.
Presuppositions	Have you noticed all the things you're learning?
Universal Quantifiers	Everything you hear adds to your ability to learn this totally.
Modal Operators	And you can enjoy your new learnings.
Nominalizations	Each new learning creates more satisfaction and more wisdom.
Unspecified verbs	Continue to relax and slow down, and learn new things.
Simple Deletion	You may be curious.
Lack of Reference	This is an enjoyable experience.
Comparative Deletion	You should allow yourself to worry less but enjoy learning more.

Pacing	You're seeing this for the second time now, and appreciating it more fully.
Utilization	The sound of people talking outside can remind you how quiet it is in here as we study.
Truism	Most people can learn easier once they know what they want to achieve.
Yes Sets	Are you looking at the diagram on page 10?...Are you noticing the various labels? ... Are you wondering how easy it will be to learn them? ... So why not go ahead and notice which ones you can already remember...
Phonological ambiguity	You can recognize the advantages intuitively because your unconscious knows, eyes and ears are receiving information.
Syntactic ambiguity	Learning states can be useful.
Scope ambig.	Remembering as a child, how easy it is to learn...
Punctuation ambiguity	That's right now you've begun to remember fully all the things you've learned.
Embedded Suggestions	I don't know how soon you'll <u>begin to learn more easily</u> .
Extended Quotes	Guy Kawasaki was a director at Apple computers and he said that his boss at Apple, Steve Jobs would just say " <u>Let's act on this now!</u> " and you would.
Selectional Restriction Violation	Your pen has learned so many things in this course.
Conversation Postulate	Do you think you can learn even more now?
Negative Suggestion	Don't get excited about all the things you're learning until you've noticed how easy it was.
Negative Tag Question	It's easy to get enthusiastic about trying this out, isn't it?
Illusory Choice	You can review the information slowly or quickly, making extra notes or using the same notes, or even by simply rereading the sections in the book, but in any case congratulate yourself once you've done it.

Although these frames may be too complex in English for the level of some teacher's students, I think the samples above can inspire us to form our own positive frames as we introduce information.

Eliminating the negative in our sentences is important. "Don't forget this." is much more effective and affectively cheering when stated, "Remember this." "Don't give up." can be improved as "Keep doing well." "Don't make a mistake with this." suggests the students will make mistakes whereas "Have fun doing well with this." implies the opposite. "Don't be embarrassed." is more encouraging as "Do this with confidence." "Don't confuse these two things." is more potent as "Notice well the difference between these two things." "Don't worry about the test." Does not indeed eliminate student's stress, but probably heightens

it, whereas "Feel relaxed about the test." Means the same thing to the teacher, but suggests to the student that they can relax while taking the test and if they did indeed, according to the theory of Noam Chomsky's Affective Filter, taking the test relaxed will improve the final output.

Troubleshooting

Foreign teachers in Japan often complain of the typical struggles they have with unresponsive "shy to speak" students, passive "no opinion" students, distracted "rather read my comic book or my cell phone messages under the desk" students, "chattering in Japanese to their friends" students, and recently "rude" no reply students. One teacher complains about the slouching body language of students that seem to express their unconcern with teacher's efforts to get them involved in speaking English. Another teacher complains when seeking to scold a student for actually taking a call on their cell phone in the midst of class and not bothering to leave class nor lower their voice to a whisper, was replied to with the angry retort, "Die, teacher." A third teacher says the students that she most "wants to shoot" are the students who put their heads down on the desks and fall asleep. I of course, true to my premise that teachers must respect students, suggest that we shouldn't even joke about wanting to shoot students. "What we want to shoot" is the trouble. My home state is famous for the raising of mules, a particularly strong but stubborn cross between a horse and a donkey. My mom always said, "You can't push a donkey, if you even try, it'll kick you; but you can make it move if you lead it with a carrot." I suggest that even in class disturbances a kind word is more effective than an angry or punitive one.

For the unresponsive students or the rude "no reply" student, I write on the board: "Please repeat the question." "Please give me a moment to think of my answer." "Please let me use my dictionary for a moment." and "I'm sorry I don't know." Then I kindly smile at them, repeat my question, and if again there is no response, I point to the four sentences and ask, "Which one of these, do you want to say?" If they continue not to respond, I leave the teacher podium, approach their desk, bend down with a concerned look on my face and say encouragingly, "I'm worried that you might be sick. Are you OK?" I repeat the question just beside them, and they never fail at this point to respond in some way. Any response is met with a big smile of relief as if they just recuperated from a serious case of deafness and I, their teacher, am so happy for their recovery.

For the "no opinion" students, I smile encouragingly and simplify the question-offering some possible answers. "What is your favorite type of music?" can be simplified to "What music do you like, do you like rock, or classical, or pops, perhaps J-pops?" Even a simple one word reply such as "J-pops" is then greeted with a smile of happiness from the teacher. To the next student, I might say, "Kenji likes J-pops, how about you?" A few students later if another student replies that their favorite kind of music is J-pops, I will smile and say "Like Kenji!" This use of their first name and remembering their opinion somehow

gives them a sense of belonging to the conversation and keeps the formerly non-speaking student more probably engaged for the rest of the class.

For the student who does surreptitious things such as reading a comic book, writing a paper for a later class, or using their cell phone or even blatant and rude interruptive things such as speaking Japanese, I show concern by stopping my speaking if I am speaking or asking a different student to "wait just a minute" and then I stare at them. It may take some time if they are engaged in typing on their cell phone etc. for them to notice that I am staring at them, not with an angry look, but with a concerned look. But usually when they do realize that all the class has stopped and the attention is focused on them and their bad behavior they apologize. If they don't apologize and put the comic book away then I engage them with a "message of concern for them" such as "Do you have some urgent message you must answer? Perhaps you need to take your cell phone outside." "Do you need to leave the room?" "Do you and your friend have something important to talk about just now during class time, please hurry outside to discuss it so that we can continue the class."

Dealing with a Repeated or Serious Misbehavior

Usually that class-stopping focus of attention once or at most twice is sufficient to end the bad behavior; but if it isn't I do not deal with it in class but ask the student to talk to me after class. Then with a seeming concern for their privacy I wait until all the other students have left the room and give them what Teacher Effectiveness Training (hereafter TET) calls the "I message".

Instead of an angry and threatening response to a bad problem such as "You are failing this class because of not doing any of your homework." "You won't stop talking in my class, I've told you a hundred times to stop, every time I move your seat, you begin talking with whoever you're sitting by and you get them in trouble too, so you may not come to class any more. I'm kicking you out!" Or "What do you think you're doing, using a cheat sheet in my midterm exam. That's it. You're out. What a disgusting person you are!" one can give an I message which according to Bolstad:

1. Has a high chance of changing the behaviour of another person when you find that behaviour unacceptable.
2. Protects the self esteem of the other person.
3. Preserves the quality of the relationship between you and the other person.
4. Helps the other person to understand what goes on between you better, and to 'grow' as a person

An "I message" has four parts, according to TET:

1. a non-blameful description of the behaviour, what actually happened
2. the actual, concrete, tangible effects of that behaviour on me

3. How I feel about the behaviour and its effect
4. Verbally pacing the responses (especially the resistances) to the I Message

To use an "I message" effectively, I must take each step and be careful about how I do it. If the behavior that irritated me is fresh and I am in a strong state of anger, it is a sign to me to let it go until the end of class and deal with the student privately. It also means I need to be sure I can calm myself down enough not to be blameful (not in my words and not in the look on my face). To do this I breathe deeply and seriously ask myself, "What good thing do you want for this student? How can you help this student? If this were your son or daughter how would you want his or her teacher to respond to this so as to help your child to good behavior. You are the teacher, so how can you teach this student effectively and caringly?" As I am a mother of a son who has in the past been a less than perfect person, these questions never fail to change my attack mode feelings into teacherly concern. So I am able to say, "Your cell phone rang in class today..." "I heard you saying something in Japanese to the student sitting beside you..." "I noticed you looking at a list of answers for the exam written on a small piece of paper under the desk."

Second it is very important for the person giving the "I message" to convince the person they are speaking to that the behavior gives the teacher a real, concrete problem and also thirdly, the teacher has feelings about his or her problem. "When your cell phone rang, I noticed that many students stopped listening to the lesson and I felt sad because I thought time was taken from my English class which I had prepared for carefully. I wanted the class to go smoothly but it seemed interrupted and I felt surprised and upset and couldn't teach well after that." Or "I believe in a language class it is good to use the language one is learning as much as possible. I'm really happy when students try hard to speak English even though I know it is difficult sometimes. I'm really sad when students stop speaking English and switch to Japanese, especially if they are not talking about what the class is learning but are chattering about other topics, because this takes away their opportunity to practice what I'm teaching. If students don't practice, I feel that they won't learn well. I feel frustrated because I've prepared a lesson and yet the students won't learn it. I feel like I can't do my job for which I'm paid. I feel like a bad teacher who can't teach when students don't use English. I feel that my preparations are wasted and my other students' time is wasted when English class time is filled with the sounds of Japanese. It really makes me feel sad and frustrated." Or "I realize you hadn't learned the answers for the test and so were copying the answers and I felt sad that I had failed to teach you. I felt sorry for the other students who had perhaps spent hours studying for the test and perhaps felt it unfair that your test would be perfect or almost perfect without the efforts they had made. I also felt sad because you will leave my class at the end of the year without having learned the English I had hoped to teach you. These feelings of my failure and sadness really upset me and made it difficult for me during the test."

Lastly it's very important that I pace the student's reaction, that means I deal with and try

to stay on a friendly footing with the student when they respond. Some students respond in anger, to which I must not return anger but turn the other cheek with a second "I message" such as "I see you are upset about this. I'm sorry to see you upset, it makes me sad (or frightened in some cases where students actually seem aggressive in their anger)." Some students make no response but hang their head in silence to which I must pace, "Is there some way you can help me with my sad feelings about this problem of mine?" Some students come up with a suggestion for solution that doesn't meet all my needs, for example "English is too difficult for ninety minutes. I want to chat to reduce my stress. You should let me speak Japanese. You should speak Japanese, too." To which I responded, "Yes, ninety minutes is a long time. Perhaps we could start class five minutes early, then take a five minute Japanese speaking break right in the middle. Would that be possible? Would you be able to arrive in class five minutes early or perhaps three minutes early for a three minute break?" and in the case of the student with the cheat sheet, I didn't simply accept, "Please let me pass. I will never cheat again." but I did agree to an eventual re-testing two weeks later after they would have time to catch up their studies especially when that student agreed to arrange to reduce the club activities they were taking part in after school to give them more study time. I think there is no behavior too bad to forgive. I think there is no student who doesn't deserve my best efforts to teach them. I think there is no human being who doesn't need to be treated with kind concern and respect. These three principles have gotten me through thirty years of bad moments in the classes of five different countries.

Assigning homework

Towards the end of the class, a teacher needs to let the students know what pages they need to prepare or what things they need to write etc. before the coming week's class. Again I think this is an opportunity for us to either be inspiring or not. One can say, "Read page 74 and write exercise B." or one can say, "Let's look at page 74. Exercise B is a fun set of questions that help you practice the thing you just learned today and which you are doing very well with. It adds one more interesting part... I hope you can enjoy looking at it and coming up with answers for next week. I look forward to hearing each of your answers, so do take some time to make them as interesting as you surely can. Thanks."

Final words

In many of my schools there is a bell or buzzer that marks the end of class and students quickly start slamming books closed and putting things into their book bags, and consulting their cell phones for any messages they've received or perhaps to find the room number of their next classroom. A typical militantly teacher controlled class may be trained to stay in their seats until they hear "Class is dismissed." or "You may go." I find this time another opportunity to show my respect for my students, and like my closing words to be.

"Thank you for your good English speaking in my class. That was fun. See you next week." This was also voted most popular ending phrase to hear by my students who were polled.

Knowing what to say to make students happy to be in your class and to bring forth their best efforts most effectively, may be a matter for teachers simply to ask them in similar polls, "What do you want to hear me say?"

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