

Dr. Eric Rubinstein – guest contributing author

# The Power of Language

We are taught from an early age that what we say carries power. “If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say it at all.” Or, to avoid conflict, “Use your words.” While we, as teachers, may not consider our speech the way we consider our pedagogy, there is no denying that what is said at any moment can (and will) leave a lasting impression. Students look to us for answers, for guidance, for support, which in turn results in them hanging on every word.

As a professor of pre-service teachers, I often contemplate the nuances of language and how the slightest misconception or misunderstanding can influence a student’s connection to the teacher or the material. Teacher-preparatory coursework tends to prioritize research and practice, but where do we learn how to communicate? Do we learn through observation? Are we, as a teaching community, modeling appropriate language ourselves?

## Direct and indirect language

A piece of advice that I was given at the start of my own career (which I still cherish to this day) is, “There is a fine line between being friendly and being friends.” While we may be moving away from the expectation of “not smiling until December,” the pendulum cannot swing completely to the opposite side. It is all about balance.

The ethos of a school or community will ultimately define what is considered appropriate language, but that does not diminish the importance of code switching between formal and informal speech.

One way to promote a warm (yet productive) environment is through direct language. For example, we may consider using “Please do...” instead of “Can you...?” It is the difference between a question mark and a period, the difference between upward and downward inflection, the difference between permission and accountability.

The same can be said about indirect ‘filler words’ (e.g. um, like, okay, you know, etc.). While we tend to use these informal words and phrases as a means of transition, they can often be interpreted as nervous, unorganized, or unclear.

We know that assessment is necessary for student success and ensemble growth, but we also know that feedback can present as negative criticism if we are not careful. Teachers and conductors are often faced with the quagmire of giving feedback - wanting to be serious enough that students also take it seriously, but not too serious that it discourages their work.

One way to approach this fine line is through direct and deliberate language. For example, “good” or “great” (and the like) are terms that can promote positive self-esteem and encouragement; however, it is important to avoid using these terms as a function of transition (or as ‘filler words’). Students are intuitive and empty compliments will undoubtedly result in lower effort and lower expectation. Specific praise (when it is earned) will not only provide students with the feedback they need for success, but also will leave students with feelings of accomplishment.

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## Subtleties in discourse

There is a shift in classroom dynamic when both students and teachers are sensitive to the ways in which they speak, starting with replacing words that carry negative connotation. For example, when we say “should,” we are inadvertently saying that our idea is superior. Replacing it with “could” allows students to consider your comments while drawing conclusions for themselves. Similarly, the conjunction “but” contradicts the preceding phrase (e.g. “Clarinets, that was well-played, but...”). In essence, the initial feedback is no longer valuable since it has just been negated. Instead, we may consider a hard stop or period. (e.g., “Clarinets, that was well-played [period] When we repeat, keep in mind...”).

Do you begin statements with “I,” “me,” or “my”? Or with “I want,” “I would like,” “my ensemble,” “my students”? In *The Choral Director’s Cookbook*, Tom Wine suggests that this kind of language “implies that the rehearsal is for the conductor and not for the singers.”<sup>1</sup> A change in perspective to “we” and “us” will encourage a greater sense of community among students and ensure that the classroom experience is welcoming for all.

## Vernacular that supports students

Education is a field that constantly shifts with time and circumstance. Teachers are often in the unique position where they are simultaneously responsible for educating future generations, while (perhaps) needing some support to stay ahead of the curve. A 21st century education requires an updated vernacular that not only reflects current practices in classroom instruction, but also supports the needs of our students. A detailed explanation and analysis of culturally responsive pedagogy is beyond the scope of this article; however, we cannot ignore the evolving landscape of education that requires

the use of socially conscious and relevant language. To better understand the modern classroom, we may consider the students’ perspectives first. For example, how might a younger, unchanged male voice, or an older, non-binary soprano or alto feel when the director refers to their section as “ladies?” How might an LGBTQIA+ student feel if they are always singing texts that support heteronormative depictions of love?

Socially reflective language is the cornerstone of building inclusive classrooms. Change can be difficult, but small efforts are always appreciated. Start by avoiding “guys” as a plural term, or refer to choral singers by voice part and not by gender. Commit to learning more about these new initiatives and do not be afraid to ask tough questions. Students have more than likely been exposed to these traditions through other mediums, so it becomes that much more important to normalize this language and establish its place in the classroom.

## In conclusion

As a child, I would often frustrate my mother because a teacher of mine said something that she had first said herself. In many ways, the bond between student and teacher is comparable to that of a parent. They may or may not remember a concert or piece of music, but students will most likely remember their teacher and their experience. The ability to connect through language comes with respect and understanding, and we must be sensitive to fostering this meaningful relationship as we usher in future generations. ||

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