The Things We Say

The sophomores sit at tables, chatting. Mrs. Robbins stands before the class. "Today is writer's workshop," she reminds them, "so take out your spirals for warm-up.

"After warm-up," she continues, "some of you will have to read your work aloud, so don't be surprised if I call on you." Missy glances over at Sara; Sara rolls her eyes. José rests his head on his spiral on the table and sighs.

"C'mon, José," says Mrs. Robbins, "this is no different from any other workshop day. You know that. OK, class, date on the page.

José opens his spiral and scribbles in the date.

"Today in the warm-up, we're going to work on dialogue. Remember how to quote people's words."

She places a transparency on the overhead projector. It reads, Mr. Barnes, your principal, has shut down the student paper because of a story about alleged racism in school. Imagine you are the student who wrote that story. Convince Mr. Barnes to change his mind.

She checks her watch. "You have seven minutes, begin." She glances around the room, gives Marcella the look that says get going, and then retreats to her computer to check her email. Minutes later, when the students have finished, she calls on a few to read their work aloud, giving each positive feedback:

"Good, Melissa, I like that word, ignited."

"Thanks, Mike, wonderful ending."

In this writing workshop, we notice some familiar things: class begins with a warm-up, everyone writes (except the teacher), the teacher supplies the prompt, students share what they've written, and the teacher provides positive comments as feedback. Throughout, Mrs. Robbins's choice of words reveals that she views herself as an activities director ("take out your spirals") and evaluator ("Good, Melissa"), and she views her students as people who must respond to her commands ("don't be surprised if I call on you"). She underscores the predictable classroom culture ("this is no different than any other workshop day") and autocratic design of the classroom ("some of you will have to read"). And, to her, "writing" is externally imposed (she provides the prompt) and instructionally driven ("Today in the warm-up, we're going to work on dialogue"). The language of this classroom reveals much about perceived teacher and student identities, the learning community and human relationships, and the operational definition of writing.

In Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning, Peter H. Johnston, professor of education and chair of the Department of Reading at State University of New York at Albany, focuses on teachers' words in classrooms, "those things teachers say (and don't say) whose combined effect changes the literate lives of their students" (2). This is a powerful book, one that will reinforce the language thoughtful teachers employ to help students become independent, active learners; it will also challenge the ways many teachers talk with students, ways that work against their best intentions at times.

This is a powerful book, one that will reinforce the language thoughtful teachers employ to help students become independent, active learners; it will also challenge the ways many teachers talk with students, ways that work against their best intentions at times. Choice Words draws our attention to the ordinary language of classrooms that, in the rush of our daily teaching lives, we seldom heed. By pointing out how our words both positively and negatively impact student achievement, Johnston illuminates the
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power of classroom discourse and encourages us to become more conscious of and reflective about what we say and how we say it.

Choice Words is based on research into "how successful literacy teachers work their magic in the classroom" (2). These teachers were considered successful "because their students did well on conventional literacy tests and because people who were familiar with their work recommended them, aspired to be like them, or wished to have them teach their children." While each teacher was considered "excellent in his or her own way . . . each had areas with which he or she struggled, just like the rest of us." Thus, these were not perfect teachers, just "accomplished" ones who "build emotionally and relationally healthy learning communities—intellectual environments that produce not mere technical competence, but caring, secure, actively literate human beings" (2).

Johnston’s research derives from data collected in elementary classrooms, and there is no doubt that identical data could come from secondary and postsecondary classrooms as well: I have heard the same words and phrases uttered at every level of schooling, K–13. Thus the examples apply broadly. Drawing heavily from sociolinguistic theory and research, Johnston argues that language not only describes reality but also creates realities and "invites" identities (9). Referring to students as "writers," for instance, identifies them as members of the writers’ club, to borrow from Frank Smith’s “Literacy Club” (9). Likewise, the “implications of talking about reading as ‘work’ are different from referring to it as ‘fun’” (Johnston 9); such a simple—and common—word choice as work equates reading with something one does not do for leisure. In subtle ways and over time, students pick up on such linguistic nuances, and their identities as readers, writers, thinkers, and human beings are shaped accordingly, as are their perceptions of reading and writing.

Johnston presents five categories of classroom discourse with a chapter on each. In each category he cites words that are “examples of linguistic families, in the sense that, though they have different surface forms, they share some common features and common sociolinguistic genetic material” (10). Thus, for instance, poet, essayist, and journalist all share a similar concept that student does not. Below, I discuss each category, situating the examples in an English classroom.

Noticing and Naming

The ability to classify by recognizing patterns is a crucial intellectual operation and the basis for how we come to know the world. As readers, students rely on pattern recognition, for instance, to identify elements in a story and motivations for character, discover themes and rhyme schemes, and predict story events. As writers, they categorize to make sense of writing—for example, to learn the features of genres, understand the conventions of written language, master spelling, and recognize their affinities with other writers. Successful teachers encourage students to make sense of information by inviting them to notice and then name what they notice:

> "Did anyone notice . . . [e.g., how this author creates tone, any interesting words, how dialogue is written]?”

> "Did you notice anything that surprised you here?"

> “What kind of story is this?”

> “Have we read anything else that has this theme?”

Questions such as these invite students to make sense of information by observing closely and looking for patterns. Noticing and naming questions place responsibility for learning on the learner, not on the teacher, as Johnston points out: when "children in class can’t help themselves from noticing and pointing out patterns, teaching becomes a whole lot easier. The teacher is no longer the source of knowledge” and “children learn that what they notice matters” (18). Importantly, students also learn that someone thinks they are “noticing people” (17), a complementary trait that may become part of their identity.

Identity

“Building an identity means seeing in ourselves the characteristics of particular categories (and roles) of people and developing a sense of what it feels like to be that sort of person and belong in certain social places” (Johnston 23). In English classrooms, students have the opportunity to “build and try on different identities . . . [and] teachers’ comments can offer them, and nudge them toward, productive identities” (23). Students who see themselves as bona fide readers or writers take up healthy identities that fuel motivation and further achievement. For example, saying to a student, “What a talented young poet you are” and “As a journalist, how did you . . .” invites the student to “imagine herself in that identity” (23). I suspect that most of us became English teachers for this reason—we imagined ourselves as
members of the writers’ club or the readers’ club.

Similarly, when teachers address students as writers through such questions as, “What are you doing as a writer today?” they present as givens two assumptions: “that a) the student is a writer, who b) will be doing something that writers do” (25–26). If it is true that, as the poet William Stafford said, “Writers are persons who write” (23), then what reason can teachers possibly have for not referring to students as writers? If the same is true for readers—readers are persons who read—then by extension teachers can ask such reader questions as “How do you see yourself as a reader?” and “What reading strategy did you use to get through that difficult story?” Questions such as these “insist . . . that the control of learning belongs to the student . . . [turn] attention to the strategies that make learning possible . . . [and] position them as active agents in their learning” (Johnston 26).

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Agency and Becoming Strategic

“If nothing else, children should leave school with a sense that if they act, and act strategically, they can accomplish their goals. I call this feeling a sense of agency” (Johnston 29). Developing a strong sense of self as agent is essential to one’s emotional and intellectual well-being, and this “is where the mediation of teachers’ language becomes crucial.” Johnston urges his readers to examine the “kinds of stories we arrange for children to tell themselves” (30). That is to say, if students were to imagine themselves as protagonists in their stories of themselves as writers and readers, how might they describe themselves? As writers who persevered and wrote that story? As victims whose history of failure with spelling convinced them that they would never be a writer? As readers who are not good enough to read difficult poetry or maintenance manuals or science textbooks? “The problem for us to solve, then, is how we do we arrange for children to tell many literacy stories in which they are the successful protagonists?” (31). Below are some of the ways Johnston’s exemplary teachers encouraged a sense of agency. Notice how their language positions the student as agent and protagonist:

> “How did you figure that out?”
> “How are you planning to go about this?”
> “Where are you going with this piece [of writing]?”

“Why” questions and responses to them “are the essence of inquiry” (37). Applying “why” questions to students’ reading and writing choices and strategies “helps them develop the consciousness and hence ownership of their choices.” Employing “why” questions with the study of literature “brings to consciousness the feelings, intentions, relationships, motives, logic, values, and plans that lie beneath action and are the hidden levers of narrative” (37).

In classrooms, agency is the most important goal because it builds confidence and competence:

> Children who doubt their competence set low goals and choose easy tasks, and they plan poorly. When they face difficulties, they become confused, lose concentration, and start telling themselves stories about their own incompetence. In the long run they disengage, decrease effort, generate fewer ideas, and become passive and discouraged. Children with strong belief in their own agency work harder, focus their attention better, are more interested in their studies, and are less likely to give up when they encounter difficulties. (Johnston 40–41)

Generalizing

Effective learners transfer learning from one situation to another. In writing, for example, they may apply the techniques of narrative to writing historical fiction, or they may analyze advertising using strategies learned in writing argumentation. Likewise, readers may generalize when they see universal human qualities in particular characters or when they apply a predictive reading strategy from literature to, say, social studies texts. Thus, generalizing is highly imaginative because one must extend from the familiar to the unfamiliar and from past experience to future encounters.

The teacher statements Johnston provides in this chapter foster not only generalizability but also choice and agency. Adapted to the English classroom, they might look like these:

> “What is another way you might start this essay?”
> “That’s like the last story you wrote, where you . . .”
> “When you read The Things They Carried, did that remind you at all of The Red Badge of Courage?”
> “What if . . . ?”

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“What if” questions invite rich, imaginative discussion, for they pose hypothetical speculation that develops “mind experiments” (48), those mental events where facts interact with possibilities and where alternatives can be safely explored without “real consequences” (48). “Hypotheticals,” Johnston writes, “are the stuff of invention [and] mind experiments . . . can allow us to notice things that are otherwise too naturalized to be noticed, and help us use our experience to understand possible events we have not experienced” (48).

Knowing

In the transmission model of education, teachers are the vessels of knowledge and students are the empty containers. Most of us know the problems that stem from this model, the most significant being the passive role forced on students, the amount of pressure put on teachers to know virtually everything, and the politics of control it engenders. The typical discourse pattern for the transmission model “has been called the IRE for teacher Initiates, student Responds, and teacher Evaluates” (Johnston 53; emphasis in original). While there may be legitimate uses for IRE patterns in the classroom, such as in checking comprehension, the sequence itself instantiates autocracy too often, “positioning the teacher in the role of authority and knowledge giver and the student as the knowledge receiver without authority” (54). In this chapter Johnston attends to classroom discourse in which students play “a more active role in the ownership and construction of knowledge” and in which the “(unspoken) premise of which is that the students are experienced thinkers who have something to say that is worth listening to” (54):

> “Let’s see if I’ve got this right” (54) validates the student’s knowledge, shows that the teacher wants to be certain of what the student has said, and opens the possibility for the student to modify, elaborate on, or refine what he or she has said.

> “That’s a very interesting way of looking at it. I hadn’t thought about it that way. I’ll have to think about it some more” (57). In this example, the student’s view is validated and the teacher presents as a colearner.

> “How did you come to know that?” or, “What makes you think that?” or, “Why did you write it that way?” Stated in a nonthreatening, genuinely interested way, these questions open the possibility for students to reveal their logic, the textual information that led to their point of view, and their understanding of concepts. It also allows teachers to learn more about how students come to think in the ways they do.

As Johnston rightly points out, “knowing” questions send a message that the speaker is a thinker, regardless of whether teachers agree with the results of that thinking.

An Evolutionary, Democratic Learning Community

Johnston makes clear his goal for rethinking the language of the classroom: to foster evolutionary, democratic learning communities. Noting that students “grow into the intellectual life around them” and that “intellectual life is fundamentally social,” he reminds us that supportive learning communities enable learners to risk “trying out new strategies and concepts and stretching themselves intellectually” (65). The language of a learning community can underscore or undermine such egalitarian values. Teachers who control all decision making, who distance themselves from learners through the language of power, and whose words detract from agency do not foster the development of independent, confident social learners.

On the other hand, teachers whose language expresses democratic values are able to nourish learners who have the capacity to think critically, exercise empathy, appreciate difference, explore alternately, take risks—and grow. Questions such as “How do you think she feels about that?” engender empathy and imaginative projection into the hearts and minds of others. Use of the plural pronoun we in such statements as “It looks like we agree on the first four classroom rules” and “Where are we on this?” implies shared goals and collaborative decision making.

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Asking, “Are there any other ways to think about this?” encourages diversity of opinion, and “Who has another opinion?” establishes and validates the vocal rights of all community members.

Johnston believes that the “way we interact with children and arrange for them to interact shows them what kinds of people we
think they are and gives them opportunities to practice being those kinds of people" (79). If we wish for them to become empathic, critical thinkers, then our language should incorporate the words and values of such thinking. If we wish for them to become active agents who take responsibility for themselves as learners, then how we talk with them (and how we treat them) ought to encourage agency and responsibility. And if we wish for them to become human beings with integrity, then we should address them with the language of individual integrity.

Now, let us suppose that Mrs. Robbins has also read Choice Words, and she is reflecting on how she spoke with her sophomores during that writing workshop. She senses a tension between her desire to celebrate writing through public reading and the autocratic way she forced her students to share. She also notices that it was she who thought for her students when she told them to take out their spirals. They are so used to teachers telling them what to do and think, she muses. I called them “students,” too, which they are, of course, but I could have referred to them as “writers”; after all, writers do write in notebooks! But, then again, I said “spirals,” not notebooks! She recalls evaluating Melissa’s writing with “Good,” when she might have asked Melissa why she chose to write ignited rather than started. And then there is that prompt, she thinks, it’s so artificially imposed. No wonder their warm-ups are perfunctory. What if I presented the prompt as a challenge, the way you might challenge a runner to run faster or an actor to assume a character’s mannerisms? I wonder if I could challenge them, as writers, to show anger in Mr. Barnes’s words without telling readers he’s angry?

Works Cited