

## POSITIVE LANGUAGE IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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As part of the challenging goal of helping students develop linguistic knowledge and proficiency, EFL teachers juggle many complex socio-affective\* tasks:

- Correcting errors and offering suggestions
- Assessing progress and participation
- Maintaining classroom discipline and enforcing rules
- Guiding student interpersonal relationships during group work, pair work, and whole-class activities
- Nurturing students' confidence as they learn new content and skills
- Motivating students to progress and develop autonomous learning habits
- Planning and managing learning experiences for students with diverse learning styles, personalities, maturity levels, and self-regulation abilities

Facing all of these intricate tasks, along with the pressures of time and limited resources, it is no wonder that teachers can become frustrated and exasperated at times. However, even in times of frustration we must work to maintain a positive learning environment and remember that our students' opinions and feelings must be treated with care. Teachers can do this not only by establishing routines and rules, but also with the language, verbal and non-verbal, used to communicate with students.

Teachers' words can have long-lasting effects on learners. Everyone, regardless of age or background, appreciates being spoken to in an encouraging and positive way. This is not to say that teachers should over-praise students – something they will surely notice and view as insincere – but that they should look for ways to reframe (rephrase or restate) negative language they might be tempted to use as positive statements.

Classroom language, even when you are enforcing rules, should encourage students to choose positive behaviors and demonstrate that teachers believe they can make such choices. For example, what difference do you see between the following statements?

- ***Everyone, stop talking now. Sit down!*** (teacher claps hands and looks angry)
- ***We'll begin once everyone is seated and quiet.*** (teacher silently waits with a positive expression on her face and looks expectantly at students)

Students who regularly feel insecure, embarrassed, or angered by a teacher's communication style aren't learning effectively. This week's Teacher's Corner will explore a few quick ways to use voice tone, words, and body language to foster positive classroom rapport, mutual respect, and trust. For more tips related to positive language use, review Sally White's 2014 webinar, "**Reframing: The Power of Positive Language**," part of the *Shaping the Way We Teach English* webinar series; some examples below are adapted from that presentation. The slides are available in the "Downloads" section of this webpage.

\* **socio-affective**: relating to emotions and relationships with others

## IDEAS: USING POSITIVE LANGUAGE IN THE CLASSROOM

### 1. Look for ways to reframe statements and words to focus on the positive:

Negative – deficiency focus	Positive – constructive focus
problem	challenge
impatient	excited, enthusiastic, eager
You're working too slowly. Hurry up.	Everyone is working carefully and being thorough, but we only have 5 minutes left to finish.
Michael, don't be late again! You'll be in big trouble.	Michael, be on time, please. What happens if you are late more than three times? [prompt the student to supply the consequence]
Muriel, stop interrupting John.	Muriel, please look at our classroom rules chart. Do we listen quietly while others are speaking?
No, that is wrong. The answer is ____.	Hmm...that is a tough one! Let's look at this example together. [Guide the student(s) through the challenge with prompts to see if they can arrive at the correct answer]

### 2. When giving correction or praise, try to focus on specific behaviors or examples.

**No:** *Everyone, calm down...behave.*

**Yes:** *Everyone, please return to your seats, sit quietly, and put your pencils and pens down.*

**No:** *Jenny, I like the way you are behaving.*

**Yes:** *Jenny, thank you for waiting for your turn to speak. You are being very patient.*

**No:** *There is too much talking going on. Pay attention.*

**Yes:** *We'll continue when all mouths are quiet and everyone is ready to listen to Sara.*

### 3. **Body language and tone of voice:** Project positivity with relaxed, open body language. Use a calm, warm, and professional tone of voice that is age-appropriate for our students. Speak in an authentic way even if you slow your speech rate down a bit for lower levels.

- **Body language varies from culture to culture. Examples below reflect negative and positive American body language.**

**No:** scowling and frowning, rolling your eyes to be dismissive, throwing your hands up in the air to show frustration, crossing your arms over your chest or tapping your foot to indicate impatience, shaking a pointed finger at someone while correcting them

**Yes:** smiling, maintaining a calm and neutral face while enforcing rules, relaxing your arms and shoulders, nodding to indicate agreement or encouragement

- **Never use “baby talk,” “sugary” language, or a condescending tone.**

**No:** *Oh, sweetie, you are doing such a super, great, wonderful job.*

**Yes:** *Carlos, good job - you used five new vocabulary words in your homework assignment.*

- **Don’t be sarcastic. It is not funny and it hurts students’ feelings.**

**No:** *Marta, what part of “Stop talking” did you not understand?*

**Yes:** *Marta, it is time to listen now.*

4. **Lower levels:** EFL teachers must adjust the language used with students based on their current proficiency level. However, simple, directive language doesn’t equate to being short-tempered or rude. For classroom management purposes, students at these levels may be able to best understand shorter, imperative statements, but teachers can convey the information with a warm tone and supporting gestures. Using a positive tone and positive body language is especially important with these learners who may be extra self-conscious about making mistakes and not understanding what their teacher wants.