mission to reprint the poem by Herb Warren that appears on a
frontispiece. If you would like to read more of his wonderful poetry, the
book Herb's Poems is available only from the Friends of H. J. Warren at
Box 399, Camden, Maine 04843.

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my frequent failures to engage them through the language I know to be
most helpful. I hope they forgive this frailty.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Language of Influence in Teaching

When I was in fourth grade, my teacher turned to me in
response to one of my transgressions and said with relish, "By
the gods, thou art a scurvy knife. Verily I shall henceforth on
thine evil scarce." An observer might have chuckled and forgotten this
brief and trivial event. Its genius is easily missed. My teacher's playful
use of language got my attention, stopped the inappropriate behavior,
but at the same time it took the edge off the rebuke by making it play-
ful, leaving my dignity intact (showing that he cared), and it showed me
how valuable and interesting language can be—valuable enough to play
with, powerful enough to change behavior without force. He also
showed the possibilities for adopting other voices, drawing language
from other sources, while incidentally reminding us of a topic we had
studied in social studies. It would be foolish to argue that this single
event is the reason I use language as I do in my learning, thinking, teach-
ing, and social life. It would be less foolish, I think, to point to it as an
equation of a conversational current that left its mark on my social and
intellectual being. As with most of the teachers it has been my privilege
to study, I doubt that my fourth-grade teacher was aware of the implica-
tions of how he used language. He was just good at using it in ways that
assisted our learning. Some of us have to think more carefully about the
language we use to offer our students the best learning environment we
can.
Recently, my colleagues and I had the privilege of studying how successful literacy teachers work their magic in the classroom (Allington and Johnston 2002b). We selected these teachers as successful both 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. Each was excellent in his or her own way, and each had areas with which he or she struggled, just like the rest of us. I became particularly interested in the powerful and subtle ways these teachers used language, and began to explore its significance. In this book I focus on those things teachers say (and don’t say) whose combined effect changes the literacy lives of their students. I use examples of apparently ordinary words, phrases, and uses of language that are pivotal in the orchestration of the classroom. I drew my examples initially from the teachers in our study, and I have added examples from the work of other researchers and from my own experience to elaborate on what I’ve observed.

My initial interest was in how teachers’ use of language might explain their students’ success in becoming literate, as documented on literacy tests. However, I frequently watched teachers accomplish remarkable things with their students and at the end of the day express guilt about their failure to accomplish some part of the curriculum. This guilt was, in my view, both unfounded and unproductive. It was caused, in part, by the teachers’ inability to name all the things they did accomplish. Consequently, my second goal with this book is to reduce this guilt by showing the complex learning that teachers produce that is not recognized by tests, policy makers, the general public, and often even by teachers themselves but that is particularly important.

If we have learned anything from Vygotsky (1978), it is that “children grow into the intellectual life around them” (p. 88). That intellectual life is fundamentally social, and language has a special place in it. Because the intellectual life is social, it is also relational and emotional. To me, the most humbling part of observing accomplished teachers is seeing the subtle ways in which they build emotionally and relationally healthy learning communities—intellectual environments that produce not mere technical competence, but caring, secure, actively literate human beings. Observing these teachers accomplish both goals convinced me that the two achievements are not completely at odds.

Some years ago, I read Mary Rose O’Reilly’s The Peacable Classroom. Early in the book she observes, “I had gone off to be a teacher, asking myself from time to time if it might be possible to teach English in such a way that people would stop killing each other” (O’Reilly 1995, p. 309). When I first encountered this confession, I was reminded of my own journey into teaching and filed both under youthful idealism. However, I happened to reread the passage while studying these teachers and realized I had been wrong. It is both realistic and fundamental. In one classroom, I noticed a student return from the library with a book. His teacher looked up and asked if he had found the book he needed for his project. His cheerful answer! “Not yet, but I found one for Richard.” In another school, I watched a whole class of fourth graders engage in a deeply philosophical discussion of science and ethics for an hour and a quarter with little input from the teacher. In another, over the course of four months, I watched as a student, who had been classified as emotionally disturbed, was systematically made undis- turbed, becoming a “normal” participant in class activities with none of his former outbursts. In the face of relentless testing pressures, these teachers were accomplishing some of what O’Reilly imagined—not without struggle, and not without soliciting the help of the students in their classes.

Exploring the nature of these teachers’ skill, I have been particularly influenced by what children have to say. My colleague Rose Marie Weber says that as a graduate student at Cornell she was introduced to some first graders. One of the girls commented that her father was going to be a doctor of philosophy. The teacher observed that Rose was, too. The girl immediately pointed out that Rose couldn’t be a doctor of philosophy, that she would have to be a nurse of philosophy. This is even funnier now that Rose is a member of the International Reading Association’s Hall of Fame, but beyond the humor is something a little darker. This first grader could not imagine herself becoming a doctor Doubtless, she also could not imagine her brother becoming a nurse. She didn’t just make this up out of nothing. She made it up out of the linguistic—or, more broadly, the discursive—environment in which she was immersed.

Children, in their own ways, teach us about the language of our classrooms. We have to ask what discursive histories have made it possible for them to say what they say. What makes it possible for a student asked, “Who else would like that book?” to respond, “Probably Patrick, he’s not the kind of guy who laughs, and he doesn’t smile too much. And in this book, he might smile” (Allington and Johnston 2002,
p. 201: Why does another student describe herself thus: "I'm on one of the lowest levels in this class. It really stinks. . . . Most of them [classmates] are above me. . . . I have Peter Williams and he doesn't care if I read with him and he always helps me out and stuff." How come a student in a different class distinguishes herself as a reader with, "I love to read mystery, adventure, suspense, and I like to read books about animals doing everyday things that we do [Johnston, Bennett, and Connin 2002b, p. 194]. . . . Barry likes to read about sports. And Amy likes to read about horses and dolphins. . . . Amanda's reading is very different from mine because hers usually have a happy ending. Mine are like never-ending stories." What classroom conversations lead to a student reporting that, "[recently] I have learned how to pronounce more words. . . . How to read more faster than before. . . . I'd like to learn how to pronounce more words" (Wharton-McDonald, Boothroyd, and Johnston 1999, p. 2)?

Teachers play a critical role in arranging the discursive histories from which these children speak. Talk is the central tool of their trade. With it they mediate children's activity and experience, and help them make sense of learning, literacy, life, and themselves.

An Example

Let me give a slightly more expanded example of what I have in mind. Consider the following transcript from a Reading Recovery lesson (Lyons 1991, p. 209):

Mary: You said, "I will to my friend, the car driver." Does this word look like will?
Melissa: No.
Mary: What letters would you expect to see if the word was will?
Melissa: W. L.
Mary: What letters do you see?
Melissa: W. A. V. E.
Mary: Look at the picture. What is the boy doing? What is the car driver doing?
Melissa: They are waving to each other.
Mary: What do you think that word could be?
Melissa: Wave.
Mary: Does wave make sense?

Melissa: Yes. "I wave to my friend, the car driver."
Mary: Does "wave to my friend, the car driver" sound right?
Melissa: Yes.
Mary: Does the word look right?
Melissa: The letters make wave.
Mary: I like the way you figured that out.

Several things strike me about this exchange. First, the teacher did not directly tell the student anything. Second, the teacher systematically socialized the student's attention to different warrants (evidence and authority) for knowledge and the importance of noticing any conflicts among perceptions and information sources. Third, although the figuring out was collaborative with the teacher playing a primary role, her final comment, "I like the way you figured that out," attributes the accomplishment entirely to the student. This final step offers the student a retrospective narrative about the event in which she stars as the successful protagonist, a collaborative fantasy that makes it possible for the child to become more than herself.

Making Meaning: Making People

When a mother interacts with her baby, she makes something meaningful out of what the baby "says." The fact that there is not much to work with does not stop her from constructing a conversation. From "benn benn" she imputes a social intention and responds, "You want milk?" She acts as if the baby's noises are not random but are intentional discursive actions, and responds accordingly. Relationally she positions the baby as a sentient, social being—a conversation partner. In the process, mother and child jointly construct the baby's linguistic and social development and lay the foundation for future interactions with others—how the baby expects to be treated and to interact (Rio and Alvarez 2002; Scollon 2001).

The same is true, in a way, in the classroom. The teacher has to make something of what children say and do. She makes sense for herself, and offers meaning for her students. She imputes intentions and offers possible worlds, positions, and identities. For example, suppose an independent book discussion group has deteriorated into chaos. The teacher decides to say something to the students. What does she say? Perhaps she says, "That group, get back to work or you'll be staying in
at lunch." On the other hand, she might say, "When you are loud like that, it interferes with the other discussion groups and I feel frustrated." On the other hand, yes, teachers have more than two hands, she might say, "This is not like you. What is the problem you have encountered? Okay, how can you solve it?" Each of these responses says something different about "what we are doing here," "who we are," "how we relate to one another in this kind of activity," and how to relate to the object of study. Each different response has the potential to alter the subsequent interactions in the class. The implications of these options are unpacked a bit in Table 1.1.

In other words, language has "content," but it also bears information about the speaker and how he or she views the listeners and their assumed relationship. Halliday [1994] calls these the ideational and the interpersonal dimensions. There is always an implicit invitation to participate in a particular kind of activity or conversation. We cannot persistently ask questions of children without becoming one-who-asks questions and placing children in the position of one-who-answers-questions.

Table 1.1: Implications of Different Teacher Responses to Social Transgression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Comment</th>
<th>Question Answered by Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That group, get back to work or you’ll be staying in at lunch.</td>
<td>When you are loud like that, it interferes with the other discussion groups and I feel frustrated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is not like you. What is the problem you have encountered? Okay, how can you solve it?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Laboring.** | Living in cooperation. | Living collaboratively. |
- **Slaves and owner.** | People who care about others’ feelings. | Social problem-solvers. Normally admirable people. |
- **Authoritarian control.** | Benevolent with equal rights. | Work out our problems. |
- **Do it only under duress.** | [no implication] | [no implication] |

Explicitness

Although language has its effects in many ways, the most common focus of attention in recent years has been on the explicitness of the language teachers use (Blight 1988; Kameenui 1995; Pressley et al. 2001; Pressley and Woloshyn 1995). Of course, if students need to know something, they shouldn’t be reduced to guessing by their teacher’s assumptions about what they “should” already know. We often assume that students know things, or know them in particular ways, when they do not. We ask kindergartners, "What is the sound of the letter at the end of the word?" forgetting that many of them are unclear about the concepts letter, word, sound [as it applies to speech], and end (which requires knowing that letters are ordered left to right), and do not know that letters bear a complex relationship to speech sounds (Clay 1991). As Margaret Donaldson notes in Children’s Minds [1978], “the better you know something, the more risk there is of behaving egocentrically in relation to your knowledge. Thus, the greater the gap between teacher and learner, the harder teaching becomes.”

People who come from different cultural backgrounds often encounter difficulties in their interactions. I recently attended an Indian wedding. Among other blunders, as I proceeded down the reception line, I tried to shake hands with the women in the wedding party, which made them uncomfortable because it is not their normal greeting and because they were not used to such contact with men. Experiences of being in a cultural minority are good for reminding us that different people can do things in very different ways. It is especially easy for mainstream teachers not to notice how difficult it can be for students from a different culture to figure out how things are done here. Those of us in the mainstream are so used to not having to face such conflicts that we come to assume that everyone says and does things the way we do. Consequently, we don’t explicitly detail how we do things because one of the rules of conversation is that you don’t tell people what they already know (Geece 1978). Minority students often pay a high price for this assumption.

In other words, it is true that we are often less explicit than we might be, that we are confusing sometimes when we try to be explicit, and that being more thoughtfully explicit can be important. Nonetheless, there are many complications to explicitness. We cannot be explicit about everything. The rules of conversation require limiting our explicit comments to what our partner doesn’t already know and to
what he might find interesting (Grice 1978). This means that deciding what to be explicit about requires some knowledge of our audience—and responsive teachers do have that knowledge of their students (Allington and Johnston 2003; Johnston et al. 1995).

The assumption that just being more explicit will make for better instruction assumes that language is simply a delivery system for information, a literal packaging of knowledge. It is not. Each utterance in a social interaction does much more work. For example, there are hidden codes in telling people things. If a student can figure something out for him/herself, explicitly provide the information preempts the student's opportunity to build a sense of agency and independence, which, in turn, affects the relationship between teacher and student. Think about it. When you figure something out for yourself, there is a certain thrill in the figuring. After a few successful experiences, you might start to think that figuring things out is something that you can actually do. Maybe you are even a figuring-out kind of person, encouraging an agentic dimension to identity. When you are told what to do, particularly without asking, it feels different. Being told explicitly what to do and how to do it—over and over again—provides the foundation for a different set of feelings and a different story about what you can and can't do, and who you are. The interpretation might be that you are the kind of person who cannot figure things out for yourself. This is a doubtful one reason why recent research has shown that most accomplished teachers do not spend a lot of time telling mode (Taylor et al. 2002).

As teachers we have to decide what to be explicit about for which students, and when to be explicit about it. Often times, as anyone with teenagers knows, being explicit is the perfect way to meet resistance. The back door is frequently more effective than the front. And of course, explicitness doesn't account for some very powerful learning. Very little of our sense of masculinity and femininity, for example, comes about through explicit instruction on the appropriate behaviors, feelings, and values. Our involvements in gendered social-linguistic interactions have much more of an effect (Kondo 1990, Lloyd 1998). I will try (explicitly) to untangle some of these details in our conversations through this book.

Speech Is Action

Speaking is as much an action as having someone with a stick, or hugging them (Altman 1962). A minister, priest, rabbi, imam, or judge, by

pronouncing two people husband and wife, make it so [to a point]. A teacher naming a child "class poet," inviting her to try on that mantle, can also make it so. The child might then begin assiduously doing the things she thinks poets do. I recall a teacher in an urban high school working with a diverse group of students responding to the poem one of them had written with, "You really are quite a poet." The student, who until that point had had little success academically, began carrying a paperback book of poetry around in his back pocket and writing more poems. By representing him as a poet, the teacher had opened the door for this student to entertain the possibility of becoming the kind of person who reads poetry and would welcome further interactions based on the premise that he is a poet.

Language, then, is not merely representational (though it is that), it is also constitutive. It actually creates realities and invites identities. Saying, "You are so smart" is very different from saying, "You are so thoughtful." The phrases invite different views of who I am, and how a person like me behaves. In a classroom, the phrases invite others to view and interact with me differently. Language works to position people in relation to one another (Davies and Harre 1999; Langendon and Harre 1999). For example, a teacher might position himself as the giver of knowledge in the classroom, with the students as receivers of knowledge. A classic (and ubiquitous) example of this is the sequence in which a teacher asks a question to which he already knows the answer, a child answers it, and the teacher announces whether or not the child is correct. Teachers can position children as competitors or collaborators, and themselves as referees, resources, or judges, or in many other arrangements. A teacher's choice of words, phrasing, metaphors, and interaction sequences invites and assumes these and other ways of being a self and of being together in the classroom.

Similarly, the way a teacher talks can position students differently in relation to what they are doing, learning, or studying. The implications of talking about reading as "work" are different from referring to it as "fun." Similarly, telling children they can have free choice time, "but first we have to finish our reading," positions reading poorly simply by using the words "have to." Although language operates within relationships, language practices also influence relationships among people and, consequently, the ways they think about themselves and each other. Language even structures our perception—the sense we make of the mental impulser that comes to our brain from our sense organs (Luria 1973).
Neisser 1976). There is no question that “discourse penetrates a fair way into the perceptual system” (Harre and Gillet 1994, p. 169). Just as we actively seek sensory information to inform our construction of reality, we actively seek new information to inform the narrative we are building about who we are and to ensure its genuineness.

In other words, the language that teachers (and their students) use in classrooms is a big deal. My intention with this book is to examine some of the ways in which it is a big deal by exploring words and phrases that turn up in conversations between teachers and their students. These words and phrases exert considerable power over classroom conversations, and thus over students’ literate and intellectual development. In the rest of the book, I list various productive phrases and words used (or systematically not used) by teachers and explain why they are significant. I have clustered the words and phrases in what I hope are conceptually useful categories, even though some of them clearly belong in multiple categories. Although these words and phrases are mere fragments of interactions, I think of them as representative examples of linguistic families, in the sense that, though they have different surface forms, they share some common features and common sociolinguistic genetic material (Reichenbach 1998).

My explanations of the significance of these language examples draw on a range of related disciplines, principally discursive psychology (Harre 1998, Harre and Gillet 1994), narrative psychology (Bruner 1994a; Edie 1994; Fivush 1994; Miller 1994), discourse analysis (Davies and Harre 1999; Wood and Kroger 2000), and conversational analysis (Hatchby and Wooffitt 1997). Consistent with these disciplines I assume that each conversational exchange between teacher and student(s) provides building material for children’s understanding of a wide range of literate concepts, practices, and possibilities, and helps shape their identities, as each exchange “becomes a fragment of autobiography” (Davies and Harre 1999, p. 38). Readers who are familiar with these disciplines, however, will realize that, from the get-go, I take many liberties. For example, I treat these language fragments as if we can make sense of them outside the immediate context of their use. Of course, we can’t. I will try to redeem myself along the way, particularly at the end of the book. In the meantime, I ask that you humor me. (If you are not inclined to humor me, please go to Appendix A for a little more explanation.)

CHAPTER TWO

Noticing and Naming

Language is the essential condition of knowing, the process by which experience becomes knowledge.

Halliday 1993, p. 94

When people are being apprenticed into an activity of any sort, they have to figure out the key features of the activity and their significance. Babies go through a “Wazziz?” (What’s this?) stage when they discover that things have consistent names. Of course they are also learning how to take control of social interactions by asking questions—and learning the fun of doing so.) Noticing and naming is a central part of being a communicating human being, but it is also crucial to becoming capable in particular activities. Becoming a physician requires learning what signs to notice, what to name particular clusters of signs, how to distinguish one drug from another, and how different drugs relate to different patterns of signs. Becoming a teacher requires knowing how to tell when learning is going well and when it is not, what children’s intonations tell us about what they know, what it means when a child does not participate productively, and so forth. As teachers we socialize children’s attention to the significant features of literacy and of learning in different domains. This pattern recognition is very powerful. Once we start noticing certain things, it is difficult not to notice them again, the knowledge actually influences our perceptual systems (Harre and Gillet 1994). It