

Do students sometimes not understand what you are saying, particularly at low levels? This lesson will help you to pinpoint problems with your classroom language and look at ways of making it clearer.

Task 1 – Andy’s Feedback

Andy used to have a problem of speaking too quickly and students found him difficult to understand. He has worked hard at trying to slow down his speech, but students have told him that they still have problems understanding his instructions and explanations.



Can you help Andy? What do you think the problem is?

Jot down your ideas on a note pad, then check the answer key below. 



Task 1 Feedback

While the speed of Andy’s delivery may have improved, he is probably still using language that is too difficult for his students. He may also be using more language than he needs.

Key Skill

Teachers should use language in the classroom that is clear and natural. It should be simple enough for students to understand, but not too simplified so that it becomes ungrammatical or condescending. Teachers need to make sure they do not use more language than is necessary with students.

Task 2 – Problems with instructions



Numbers 1 to 8 are all examples of problematic teacher language. After each example, there are two problems. Which of the two problems best describes the example?

✓ **Tick the statement you think is correct.**

1. “I want you all to get up on your feet and hitch up with someone other than your mate next to you...”

- a) The teacher uses more words than necessary.
- b) There is too much colloquial language in these instructions.

2. “Just imagine if you might be an astronaut visiting the space station.”

- a): There is too much hypothetical language that is unnecessary.
- b) The use of ‘just’ is unnecessary.

3. “Then together talking – many words – happy class.”

- a) The teacher is too specific about the language output for the activity.
- a) The teacher over-simplifies her language and is speaking in an unnatural pidgin.

4. “The ideas espoused by group 1 are very interesting.”

- a) The teacher uses a word that is overly formal.
- b) The first noun phrase in the sentence is too long.

5. “I was wondering if you could all work in pairs and then would you mind talking about the picture.”

- a) The teacher uses too much unnecessary polite language.
- b) There is too much hypothetical language that is unclear.

6. “I’m just writing up a question on the white board and I want you to ... there we go I’ve finished ... yes, you should answer the question that I’ve written up.”

- a) The teacher mixes the present progressive with the present simple and this is confusing.
- b) The teacher narrates their activity and uses more language than is necessary.

7. “So how was your weekend? Did you have a good time? Oh and I’d do task one first. I had a great weekend.”

- a) The teacher mixes social language with instructional language and this is confusing for students.
- b) The teacher narrates their activity and hides the instructions amongst the narration.

8. “Those two clauses have a hypotactic relationship.”

- a) The 2 noun phrases in this sentence are too complex.
- b) The grammar terminology used in this explanation would probably be too sophisticated for many learners.

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Key Skill

To make your teacher language clear, it helps to avoid the following: language that is very colloquial, language that is very polite, language that is rarely used or is very technical. Two other things to avoid are: narrating what you’re doing and mixing different types of language (explanation vs. instruction).

Task 3 – Instructions and gestures



Sometimes it helps to use gestures when talking to students. Look at the examples of teacher language below and decide whether you would use gestures or not. Circle 'Y' for yes and 'N' for no. If you choose 'yes', describe the kind of gesture you would use.

| Instructions | Gesture? | Describe your gesture |
|--|----------|-----------------------|
| 1. Talk together in pairs. | Y N | |
| 2. Fill in the gaps in exercise one. | Y N | |
| 3. Move around the room and talk to as many people as possible. | Y N | |
| 4. Listen and complete exercise 2. | Y N | |
| 5. Those in group A should sit on the left and those in group B should sit on the right. | Y N | |
| 6. You've got 5 minutes to finish. | Y N | |
| 7. Stand up and find the picture that matches your text. | Y N | |
| 8. Read the text and complete the True / False questions. | Y N | |

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Key Skill

A good way of reducing the amount of teacher talk you need to use is by using gesture and body language. It can also help support what you are saying and makes your language clearer for learners.

Task 4 – Making your instructions clear



The following examples of teacher language are unclear in one way or another. Rewrite them so that they are clear. The feedback provides *suggested* answers and variation is possible. 🗝️

Teacher language

1. Have a chat to your partner.
2. If you were a journalist ...
3. Time's just about up.
4. How about maybe getting into groups.
5. Check out if you were right at the back of the book.
6. Listen and work out if you've more or less got the hang of it.
7. If you could just pop the word in the right place.
8. Just have a read and jot down some of the core arguments.
9. Don't take forever – just whip through them.
10. What I want you to do is just get into pairs and have a look at what each other has got.

Thinking about your teaching ...

A good way to check your own instructional language is by taking a tape recorder to the classroom and recording yourself giving instructions. After the lesson, write out a transcript of some of your instructional sequences and analyse it to see if any of problems noted in task 2 are present in your teacher language.

Note your conclusions in your *Teaching Log*.

Taking it to the classroom ...

An interesting challenge you can set yourself (and it can be intriguing and fun for your students) is to try teaching for half an hour or an hour without talking at all and trying to mime things. You may need to write the odd word on the white board. This will give you an insight into how little it is possible to say some times with learners. Note how much more language they produce in order to fill the silence.

Want to find out more ... ?

On pages 116 - 118 of *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (4th edition) by Jeremy Harmer (Pearson 2007), there is further reading on how teachers can help students hear and understand language.

On pages 95 - 96 of *Learning Teaching* (2nd edition) by Jim Scrivener (Macmillan 2005), there is further reading on using gesture in the classroom.

Related TaskBook lessons...

You may be interested in the following lessons in the ESOL Teaching Skills TaskBook series, relating to this topic:

- **Unit 2 c) Giving instructions:** *Learn how to plan and give effective instructions in the classroom.*
- **Unit 2 b) Questioning techniques:** *Learn how teachers can effectively use questions not only to check instructions, but also to check learning.*

| |
|------------|
| Answer Key |
|------------|

**Task 2 – Feedback**

- | | |
|-------|-------|
| 1. b) | 5. a) |
| 2. a) | 6. b) |
| 3. b) | 7. a) |
| 4. a) | 8. b) |

Task 3 – Feedback

1. *Talk together in pairs.* Gesture: **Yes**. Describe gesture: The teacher points to each pair with both hands.

2. *Fill in the gaps in exercise 1.* Gesture: **No**. However, the teacher could hold up the book or worksheet and indicate the correct exercise.

3. *Move around the room and talk to as many people as possible.* Gesture: **Yes**. Describe gesture: The teacher makes circular arm movements to suggest mingling.

4. *Listen and complete exercise 2.* Gesture: **No**. However, the teacher could cup one hand behind an ear to indicate listening.

5. *Those in group A should sit on the left and those in group B on the right.* Gesture: **Yes**. Describe gesture: The teacher points to the parts of the room where the people in each group should go.

6. *You've got 5 minutes to finish.* Gesture: **Yes**. Describe gesture: The teacher holds up a splayed hand – five fingers represent 5 minutes.

7. *Stand up and find the picture that matches your text.* Gesture: **Yes**. Describe gesture: The teacher raises her hands to indicate standing up, then points to two or three pictures in the room.

8. *Read the text and complete the True / False questions.* Gesture: **No**. However,

the teacher could hold up the book or worksheet and indicate the correct text and task.

Task 4 – Feedback

1. Have a chat to your partner.
Rewrite: *Talk to you partner.*

2. If you were a journalist ...
Rewrite: *You are a journalist. (Or: Imagine you are a journalist.)*

3. Time's just about up.
Rewrite: *It's almost time to stop / to finish. (Or: 30 seconds to go)*

4. How about maybe getting into groups.
Rewrite: *Please get into groups of ...*

5. Check out if you were right at the back of the book.
Rewrite: *Look at the answers on page X of the book.*

6. Listen and work out if you've more or less got the hang of it.
Rewrite: *Listen for gist to get a general understanding.*

7. If you could just pop the words in the right place.
Rewrite: *Put the words in the correct place.*

8. Just have a read and jot down some of the core arguments.
Rewrite: *Read and write down the main ideas in the text.*

9. Don't take forever – just whip through them.
Rewrite: *Don't spend too much time on them – do them quickly.*

10. What I want you to do is just get into pairs and have a look at what each other has got.

Rewrite: *Please get into pairs and look at your partner's answers.*