



Language for Learning Policy

“Learning is the whole business of the school: it deserves to be in the forefront of the minds and conversations of everyone in the school.” Tim Brighouse & David Woods

The quality and climate of teaching and learning are shaped hugely by the language used and behaviour modelled by staff. How adults talk about learning and demonstrate their own learning habits has a very powerful effect on young learners.

‘Every word and action can send a message. It tells students how to think about themselves. It can be a fixed-mindset message that says: “You have permanent traits and I am judging them”. Or it can be a growth-mindset message that says: “You are a developing person and I am interested in your development.” It is remarkable how sensitive children are to these messages.’

Carol Dweck

Research shows that the language we use to talk about education and learning deeply affects how individuals see themselves as learners. Even something as simple as changing ‘is’ to ‘could’ or talking about ‘learning’ rather than ‘work’ makes a difference.

Ellen Langer (Professor of Psychology at Harvard) has shown that small shifts in a teacher’s language can induce marked shifts in the learning habits that students develop. e.g. if you say definitely that something *is* the case, students will take it literally and try to remember it. If you say of the same thing that it *could* be the case, they become more engaged, more thoughtful, more imaginative and more critical. That *could be* invites students to learn more actively and inquisitively. Students will question and solve problems more readily if knowledge is presented to them as being provisional. Langer found that when she probed their understanding with more creative and open-ended questions, *could be* students far out-performed their *is* peers.

Martin Seligman has shown that toxic words like ‘never’ and ‘always’ can be damaging to learners in certain circumstances. If a student says “I can never understand this type of problem” or “Maths is always too hard for me” this displays a lack of optimism and grit. Likewise,

if a teacher says “You are always distracted” or “You never complete your homework” it implies a lack of faith in the student to grow as a learner.

The word “work” has similarly toxic effect. At Isaac Newton we talk about “learning” rather than “work”, and of “independent learning” rather than “homework” (research by Ellen Langer and Sophia Snow has shown that changing such terminology has a positive effect on how learners perceive tasks).

A: Growth Mindset Language

The language of ability and labelling students as high or low ability, top set or bottom set, or gifted or talented goes against the concept of growth mindset as developed by Carol Dweck. At Isaac Newton Academy we talk in terms of prior attainment and current performance rather than ability, in the belief that everyone can improve on their scores and has the potential to grow their mind and that human qualities (including intellectual skills) can be cultivated by effort and application. So setted groups range from the class with the highest current attainment to that with the lowest current attainment.

As staff we believe in students’ potential to grow their intelligence and we speak the language of growth mindset. We ask **How** can I teach this concept to this student? rather than **Can** I teach this concept to this student? We ask **How** will they learn this best? rather than **Can** they learn this?...

At INA we avoid language that labels certain students or groups. So we talk about “students with SEND” rather than “SEND students” and “pupils with EAL” rather than “EAL pupils”.

As staff we emphasise in our language and behaviour that making mistakes is a natural and important part of the learning process: learning from mistakes is what learning is all about! It is important that as adults we talk about our learning mistakes and how we put them right.

Evidence shows that the students of adults who preach and practise a growth mindset perform considerably better than those taught by adults who believe in fixed intelligence. The fixed mindset limits achievement.

B: Language of Praise

It is important to use praise appropriately. At Isaac Newton Academy we are aware that the right kind of praise can be motivational and affirming but the wrong kind can have negative effects. For example, making a big fuss of a student who gives the correct answer to a question can suggest that the teacher is surprised that the student knew the answer!

Furthermore, *‘The wrong kind of praise leads kids down the path of entitlement, dependence and fragility. The right kind of praise can lead them down the path of hard work and greater*

hardiness. With the right kind of feedback even adults (!) can be motivated to choose challenging tasks and confront their mistakes.”

Carol Dweck.

Feedback should avoid praising “ability”. Research shows that if students are told “That’s a really good score. You are really smart at this” or “You’re really talented,” “You’re a natural” they love it and it gives them a boost – but only for the moment. The minute they hit a snag, their confidence goes and their motivation sinks. Such praise reinforces a fixed mindset and leads to all the negative fragilities of fixed mindset learners. In contrast, if students get feedback acknowledging their effort and the resultant improved score (e.g. “You really studied for that test and look at how it is reflected in your improved grade” or “You tested yourself and prepared thoroughly and see how it paid off” or “I like the way you tried some new strategies until you finally understood that!”), this makes them far more willing to push themselves further and take on new learning challenges.

As Doug Lemov states, “Great teachers praise students for their effort but never confuse effort with mastery.” They use simple, positive language to acknowledge what the student has achieved but show their expectation that they can go further to improve on their response: “I like what you have done. Can you take it further?” or “You’re almost there but there’s a bit more.. “ or “I like most of that..”

Over-praising a run-of- the-mill response sends confusing messages to students about the quality of response expected or required. Praise can be diluted by overuse. The best teachers keep their most effusive praise for the truly exceptional responses: “That was a really insightful answer.”

See INA Praise and Recognition Policy.

C: Language of Aspiration

Expectations are powerfully communicated and aspirations can be raised by the language that we use as adults. At Isaac Newton Academy staff talk about “When you are in the sixth form” not “If you decide to stay on” and “When you go to university” rather than “If you decide to go to university”. They talk about who the students are becoming and where they are heading. In response to a high quality discussion, a great teacher might say “You sounded like a university seminar group”. An art or music teacher might use phrases like “This is what professional artists/musicians do”.

D: BRIDGES Language

The BRIDGES learning dispositions and character traits are developed most effectively when staff use particular types of language and questions in their dialogue with students.

For example:

Bravery

How could you make that more interesting/risky/exciting?

What would you suggest if you were in charge?

If you were to take the initiative, what would you do?

Choose a topic that is going to stretch you

Just give it a try

Resourcefulness

What could you use to help with that?

What could you use as a tool to help you?

What are you going to need?

Where else could you make use of that?

Where could you apply what you've just learnt?

What do you know that might help?

What would be a good analogy for that?

Integrity

Who did that better than you?

Who could you learn from?

How well did you carry out your role?

How well did you stick to the learning rules?

Discovery

What do you want to find out?

What does that remind you of?

That's curious

What's odd about that?

What does that make you wonder?

Grit

What are the tricky bits? What's tricky about them?

What could you do when you are stuck on that?

How did you get over your difficulties when you got stuck?

What could you tinker with?

Who managed their distractions well whilst doing that?

Emotional Intelligence

How does that make you feel?

Who could help you learn that?

Who could you work with on that?

How could you help the group work better?

Who did that a different way?

How could you help someone else do that?

Tell me about that

What are you not so pleased with?

What do you like best about that?

How would you do it differently next time?

How did you do that?

How else could you do that?

What would have made that easier for you?

Does this way of working play to your strengths?

What else do you know that might help?

How could I have taught that better?

Self Discipline

What do you need to practise a bit more?

What would you need to do to improve that?

How could you organise things to help you learn better?

What would “even better” look like?

E: Language of honour, respect and inclusion

At Isaac Newton Academy, the school community is made up of people from a wide range of backgrounds, beliefs and cultures. It is vital that the language used by all members of the school community conveys respect to and of all. Language that is discriminatory in any way is not tolerated and it is an expectation of everyone that they challenge any such incidence appropriately.

There is an agreed set of terminology that we use at Isaac Newton Academy.

We talk about:

- girls (never ladies), boys (not lads)
- Black, Asian and White members of the community (and mixed-race)
- students with Special Educational Needs (physical or learning)
- people with disabilities, not handicaps
- those with English as a First Language or English as an Additional Language
- those eligible for Free School Meals and those not eligible
- Looked After Students to describe those in public care
- Hard To Reach Families to describe those who do not readily engage with the school.

See the INA Equality of Opportunity Policy.

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