This article explores the phenomenon of miscommunication in the classroom. Utilizing research gathered from first hand classroom observations, and interviews with both teachers and students, this author discovered that very often teachers say one thing, and students in fact hear another. The result is that students do not in reality understand what their teachers are saying. This miscommunication can lead to breakdowns in teacher-student interactions, and can even work to erode the learning process.

Though closer examination of key words and phrases that teachers use on an everyday basis, the author attempts to shed light on this problem. Based upon the findings, the author offers teachers suggestions on how to more effectively communicate with their students. It is hoped that by better understanding the importance of effective communication, teachers will avoid possible learning pitfalls that can occur within their classrooms because of miscommunications.

Even though today’s students live in a world that offers them instant access to almost unlimited information, teachers still remain the primary source of knowledge. This knowledge cannot be effectively transmitted if teachers and students are unable to understand each other. It is important that what students hear is what teachers are in fact really trying to convey. This is not always true. Teachers, unaware that they are communicating poorly, often become frustrated when students fail to follow directions or complete assigned tasks. Often these situations occur because of communication misunderstandings or breakdowns.

In order to get to the root of this communication problem some very basic question must be asked and answered. First of all, do students hear and really understand what teachers are saying? Secondly, do teachers in fact say one thing and students hear another? After spending many hours in classrooms observing, speaking, and listening to teachers and students, the answers to these questions proved quite revealing.

There currently exists in most classrooms today a subtle form of double-speak. Teachers constantly utilize phrases with double meanings. Although teachers know exactly what they wish their students to do, their inability to articulate these wishes is a primary source of ongoing frustration. Many of these double-speak phrases are easy to identify, and carry with them built in opportunities for misunderstanding. Those most commonly used include the following.
Okay

This is a simple, and yet very often misunderstood term. When teachers utilize this word they are in essence asking the students a very simple question. That question is, do you understand what we have been speaking about here? Students on the other hand hear a completely different question. They hear, do you agree? These are two very different interpretations of the word. As a result, students’ actions are usually quite different from what teachers are anticipating.

When this word for example is used in connection with course work, teachers, believing that their students understand, then move on to more complex ideas. The result is that students fall behind in their course work. This is due to the fact that they lack a basic understanding of the knowledge the teachers presented.

Substituting a phrase that better assesses what students do in fact understand, and what materials need to be reviewed, can greatly enhance instruction. Teachers simply need to ask the following questions instead. Do you understand this work? Can you explain it to me in your own words? These two questions will more accurately determine if teachers may indeed move on to the next topic, or must instead more thoroughly review what they have just taught.

This Is Important

This often used phrase can best be translated as, this is important to me, the teacher. Students may not understand that these words mean that they will most likely be tested on the materials covered.

While the meaning of the phrase is quite clear to the teacher, students rarely see the importance. If students consider the term at all, they might silently ask themselves, why? This usually unasked question goes to the heart of the problem. Why do teachers consistently fail to explain to students why certain materials are important, or at least why they are more important than other course work. If teachers were to take the time to explain the rationale as to why certain materials were more important than others, it would then follow that students would come to a better understanding of where to focus their energies when studying.

You Need To...

Teachers must come to the understanding that students rarely see the need to do anything that they do not want to do in the first place. When teachers use the expression, ...you need to study, or you need to do your homework, what they are in actuality saying is that this is important. The teacher is in reality emphasizing a point. They are saying that they will take a close look at how the students perform in this area. This is an emphasis that is not always shared because, students do not see or feel the need to do it, only the teacher sees the need.

Are There Any Questions?

No sooner are these words out of teachers’ mouths then students begin to shift their focus and attention. In the everyday world of the classroom, when teachers utter this phrase they are actually signaling that they are ready to move on to something else. Students have been trained to pick up on this signal. Instead of being an invita-
tion to students to develop insightful questions, these words are often a final curtain call on a current activity.

Here teachers lose a valuable opportunity to allow students to reflect on what they have learned, and more importantly, on what they have not learned. This critical reflection can translate into meaningful review and learning.

Teachers who casually and repeatedly use this expression are not accurately determining what students actually understand. If teachers really want to assess what their students understand, then they must learn to develop more effective questioning techniques. They must learn how to query and probe and entice students to think on higher critical thinking levels. Good questioning techniques can achieve results. Simply asking if there are any questions most assuredly will not achieve this objective.

Words Matter

Use of vague and half understood phrases are not limited to simple conversations with students. Often teachers establish an environment for learning, or in some cases obstacles to that learning, by the language they choose to use each day in their classrooms. A prime example of this is the use of the term disability.

With more and more exceptional students entering everyday classes through programs such as inclusion or mainstreaming, it is essential that teachers develop a positive mind set when preparing to educate these children. Educators must come to realize that the word disability should be viewed as a legal definition of a physical or emotional condition. It is a statement of a child’s condition, not a definitive set of criteria by which teachers should judge who the child is as a person.

By simply altering the language that they use, teachers can make great strides in changing their own belief systems. When educators for example, speak of students with challenges, as opposed to individuals with disabilities, they are well on their way to making the mental transition of seeing these children as people. This shift in teachers’ attitudes in turn allows the teachers to define their special needs students by their potential, not by their limitations.

A second example of how language can work to help or hinder the learning process centers around the need for teachers to actively emphasize the use of gender-neutral language within their classrooms. Too often teachers unconsciously utilize terms that are gender bias. "You guys" may seem like a harmless term, however it reinforces societal stereotypes.

Teachers must consciously make an ongoing effort to eliminate such terms from their vernacular and must be proactive in using gender neutral vocabulary that advocates climates of equality. These include the use of such basic terms as Firefighter or Police Officer in speech and the use of plural nouns in writing assignments to avoid the use of the "his" and "her" trap.
management” and more particularly, sport marketing gains wider currency and following and is now in vogue.

But just as other countries are curious about “the American model” and have expressed an interest in emulating to some extent what is done in the U.S., there is a need for the U.S. to observe and develop a strong club system for sport outside the school-based performance pyramid or feeder system. This is needed so that individuals who are cut off from participation at the intercollegiate sport level have a chance to develop their skills and are afforded the opportunity to access high performance sports.

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A Final Thought

Changing even the simplest use of words is a difficult task for many teachers. It is more hard work in a job that already requires a great deal of hard work. In truth it is easier to continue to utter the same old hackneyed expressions that teachers have muttered for centuries. It is easier to just pretend that students do actually understand what is said, even when teachers know they do not understand. It is also easier to turn a blind eye to the fact that at times teachers and students often do speak different languages.

While it is understood that changing one small aspect of classroom interaction between teachers and students will not bring miraculous results overnight, it should also be understood that this change has the potential for producing wondrous results over time, if teachers are willing to work hard toward that goal.

Good teachers, those teachers who love to teach and who truly want their students to learn, are willing to do yet a little more hard work. They are willing to fine tune their skills yet again and again. They are the professionals who understand that minor changes often lead to grand achievements.

In the end, these are the teachers that make a real difference, a difference in the educational system, and a difference in their students’ lives.