

# Words Matter: Instruction, Encouragement, and Affirmation in 5 Episodes

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**W**ords matter.

The world was created by the words of God. At the creation God said, “Let there be light: and there was light” (Genesis 1:3). “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth” (Psalm 33:6).

Words are alive and they have power. The Japanese term *kotodama* (言霊) means the spirit which is present in words.

“Words are containers of power... Words motivate or deflate thoughts, hopes, dreams, and actions. Words have the power to excite, inspire, elate, sadden, frighten, anger, or give hope” (Baldrige, 2018).

Words indeed can structure our lives. Even as I continue to work at the chalkface at age 75 I reflect more and more on the past half-century of my teaching career and experiences which have shaped me as the teacher that I am. Following are five encounters with words spoken or written to me at important moments during that period of time which have had a lasting impact even to this day.

In November 1967, as part of U.S. Peace Corps training for my assignment in Uganda, I did practice teaching at Washington Irving High School in New York City, then an all-girls school. My supervising teacher was Mr. Bret Schlesinger, a brilliant, master teacher of history and social studies. At that time he was teaching the Age of Enlightenment. One of his lessons which intrigued the students was an introduction to the ideas of Rousseau. I observed for one week and then stepped in front of the class for the following two weeks. I had had no previous classroom teaching training or experience, so it was quite a daunting task and I struggled. I don't remember how I picked up on the sequence of his lessons or what I actually did but I know it was not good as I somehow tried to imitate Mr. Schlesinger. Thankfully the students were kind and tolerant at least out of respect for him. In our conference one of those days Mr. Schlesinger told me, “Jim, you can't be me. You must be yourself.” I don't remember how I adjusted my lessons for the remaining days and I hope I got better at it, but those instructive words were to guide me through the coming years and to this day. Indeed, soon thereafter, in Uganda, at a secondary school in a very remote part of the country, where I wound up as the sole teacher of mathematics, I had no choice but to be myself and find how to teach in my own way. And I got good at it.

After returning to the U.S. from Uganda and completing a master's degree in African Area Studies, for the 1973-74 school year I was a daily on-call substitute teacher at Los Angeles inner-city junior and senior high

schools. Though usually my assignment at any school was for just a day, I committed my best to every lesson and to every student in my classes. Rare among substitutes, I always came to a school with a prepared lesson and I expected the students to attend to the lesson. Furthermore, I made it a point to establish my moral authority and legitimacy as the teacher in charge of the class. Students see through everything we are and do in the classroom. As Lemov (2010) makes distinctly clear, it is utterly false to think that warmth and strictness in the classroom are opposites. The teacher must be both; indeed, often at exactly the same time. “When you are clear, consistent, firm, and unrelenting and at the same time positive, enthusiastic, caring, and thoughtful, you start to send the message to students that having high expectations is part of caring for and respecting someone. This is a very powerful message” (p. 213). Once I covered a class for an absent teacher for a full week. It was a difficult-to-manage junior high school class and I did the best I could. That was not unrecognized. One day a student spoke out in class, “You care about us more than Mr. Ivory [their homeroom teacher].” Her words struck me deeply at that time and have endured in my mind for decades. They were a satisfying affirmation of my understanding and practice that the path to meaning is responsibility, as Dr. Jordan Peterson (2018) avers is essential for our lives. And I have always followed that good counsel.

Meanwhile, in September 1973 I had started to teach ESL at a community adult school in Los Angeles, again as a substitute teacher. I had a one month assignment, four nights a week, for a teacher on maternity leave. Just the month before I had completed a summer course (with Evelyn Hatch) in TESL methods and materials at UCLA Extension. I had never taught an ESL class before and with that very limited knowledge and no textbook or syllabus for the course, and no one in charge to guide me, I had to rely on my own creativity, instincts, and effort. I spent many hours at home before each lesson deciding what to do and how to do it while preparing the lesson papers and materials. Mr. Schlesinger's words still rang in my head. Well, I greatly enjoyed the one month with the class and had reason to feel pleased with the response of the students to my lessons but I was very uncertain as to how well I had done. When I came to the school again about a week later to sub for someone else, I met Ms. Lula Hobbs, the teacher for whom I had subbed for the month. She came up to me with a confident smile but in a tone of faux indignation asked, “What did you do to my students? They told me they wanted you to come back and teach the class.” Those words of encouragement meant everything to me at that time. I knew then for sure that I had found my career, though I recognized the very hard work it would take to become a good ESL teacher. And a good one I became.

But it was a new ballgame for me when I came to Japan in 1985 as an instructor at, then, the premier foreign language college (*senmon gakkō*) in the Kansai region.

Teaching English as a foreign language in this new sociocultural context, I had to approach classroom instruction in some new ways, consider new meaning for my work, and refine my identity as a teacher. Some years later Jim Cummins (2003) essay, “Language and The Human Spirit”, clarified for me what I had been doing. He observed that “there is an inseparable linkage between the conceptions of language and human identity that we infuse in our classroom instruction.” In the context of the instructional choices we make, he noted that we must examine “the extent to which the classroom interactions we orchestrate build on and affirm the cultural, linguistic, intellectual and personal identities that students bring to our classrooms.” In Japan, my aim has been to address this humanistic educational endeavor. But in the first year here I wondered if I was on the right track. Then, in May 1986, the new Academic Director, Mr. Bill Wolff, a veteran educational administrator, without prior notice came to one of my classes for a formal observation and evaluation. His very comprehensive and detailed report concluded with the remark, “A first-class performance by an expert teacher.” Those words mattered so much to me as an affirmation of the efficacy of my work in this new environment and gave me a great boost of confidence to go on with it. And two years later I succeeded him as the Academic Director for the following nine years.

While in charge of a fine staff of native English-speaking teachers in Osaka, I made more than 100 classroom visitations to observe their lessons. I followed each visit with a discussion with the teacher about the lesson along with my evaluation and advisement. I thought I knew how to work smoothly and successfully with my fellow teachers, but doing so with Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) was to be another matter. After I had come to Toyama as a university professor in 1999, I served for six years (2004 - 2010) as a member of the SELHi (Super English Language High School) advisory committee for the university’s attached (*fuzoku*) high school. A few times a year we would observe classes of the JTEs and then meet in conference with everyone for discussion. But out of frustration with their seeming inability to progress much in their teaching ways, I was too harsh and negative at times in my comments to them. After one such meeting in 2007, the chair of the committee, Prof. Masao Niisato, in response to the expression of my feelings in an email, kindly but directly asked me to speak to the JTEs at the meetings with a softer tone and more constructively and to “always keep in mind that all of us are learners ... and [the JTEs] are learning new things daily like us all about how to teach students.” His words were spot on and were expressed to me as a model of the way I should address the JTEs. With his instruction I became a much better advisor. And over the next three years the JTEs, in fact, made remarkable progress.

Words matter. They have the power to create and to influence our work and our lives. We must use them with care, with compassion, and with purpose.

“And God looked upon all that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31).

## References

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