

2014 HBA Award Winner

Listen

by Jackie Smith

Our desire to fix, move or improve our students can get in the way of hearing their voices and honoring their humanity.

Developing student voice, opportunities for higher order thinking, forging student relationships. Given this platform to share with my peers, these were the topics I know are most dear to me, the ones I wanted to share. I had an outline in my head. So I went to class and asked the students a question: "What do you want teachers to know about you?"

It was the beginning of the semester, I had just met the kids. I was not their teacher, but a visiting coach, another nice woman in the room. Their responses were tepid. "I want to do well," "I like school," "I like my teachers." These were not the deep responses I had hoped for.

How I learned what I need to know

Throughout the fall, I spent one day each week co teaching with the reading teacher. Then, one cold December morning I found this in my inbox.

Miss Smith,

I would like to work on myself, because the new is always better, to challenge yourself, to show yourself, you will be able to succeed, I think this is a happiness! But, when I'm thinking about my language, I feel like, lost, there is no way to go, no vocabulary, no enough language.. I really- really lost, seriously, I feel myself «dumb», did I deserve it? Am I? I have to find the way from this situation, problems. You know that feeling? When people around you most likely "Smart, intelligent, have enough high level of studying». They speak very clear, they have enough vocabulary, they can share their opinions, without feeling, shame. But I had and have that

shame, it seems like, if I will say or write something, it's not gonna be correct.. For first time it's fine, but when it repeats again and again, of course I will feel myself stupid, why not?

It's hard, when in my mind i have huge of ideas to share, but i can't, I am trying to explain something for someone, but i can't and the worse thing is, in the test, i had this lesson, maybe i know what is the passage is talking about, and I need to write summary about it, but I am struggling with grammar, speaking, writing.. When I my thoughts about it, I lose myself. But I need to stick up myself, there is noting is easy way to build my succeed, only one person can help me it's me, only one person can change my mind, it's me again. But I need support and someone can show me from what I can start, to get things better.

S.M.

This email stopped me in my tracks. After a few months of visiting the class, this student trusted me enough to share these thoughts. *This* is what she wants her teachers to know.

Let them be their authentic selves

My first thought was to find a vocabulary study program, start a book club, talk to her teacher, *help her*. But as I reread it, I heard her voice more clearly. I felt the depth of her desire to connect. Not just in her new language, but to her own humanity. She wanted to be understood. Her voice was there, I just had to listen. My reaction, I'm sure, is not uncommon, but I wonder what correcting her work might have done to her voice. I wonder if engaging in dialogue with her, mediating only her thinking, not her grammar, spelling, vocabulary might strengthen her voice in a way that red (or purple pen) might. Even letting that work be, and offering to enact "solutions" could imply that her voice is broken.

My response to this letter was to engage with the student on mindset around language learning, around what power her voice carried. I told her that I would use her voice to connect

with other teachers. I also offered to support her in her academic and narrative writing in any way I could, but that I would never correct every single issue, because her voice should not be compromised.

Our responsibility to teach language is second only to our responsibility to teach people. That is our charge, listen to each student's voice. Offer pathways for expression. Honor the struggle and sometimes fight our own urges to correct, repair, move forward. Give students the tools, help them clear the road, but always let them be their authentic selves.

Bio: Jackie Smith is an EL Instructional Coach in the Robbinsdale Area Schools. She works with EL teachers, co-teaching partners, and other teachers of EL students to help them improve their practices with students. She is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin (BA Anthropology) and the University of Minnesota (MEd. Second Languages and Cultures).

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