



FROM CHAOS TO CALM

By Rene Rohrer, M.A.
LEAP Facilitator & TAP Consultant
rrohler@ces.org

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Declarative Language as an Intervention for Classrooms: A Guide for Teachers

Effective communication is at the heart of a well-managed and inclusive classroom. One powerful approach that can support student engagement and independence is the use of declarative language. In her book *Declarative Language Handbook*, Linda K. Murphy explores how shifting from directive to declarative language fosters intrinsic motivation, problem-solving skills, and social development in students.

Understanding Declarative Language

Declarative language is a communication style that involves making statements, observations, or reflections rather than giving direct commands. This approach encourages students to think, process information, and make their own decisions. For example, instead of saying, "Sit down and open your book," a teacher might say, "I see an open chair ready for someone to sit in." The latter invites the student to observe and respond rather than comply with an order. Using declarative statements can reduce anxiety and challenging behaviors because it offers choices rather than demands and frames situations as a connection rather than compliance.

It is not an answer for every situation or for every student. There are considerations around authenticity and being real to create the trust needed in teacher and student relationships. Monitoring one's own tone and intentions for using declarative language are also imperative for being able to use the strategy effectively and keep trust and felt safety intact in the classroom. Many of our students can view being given a demand as a loss of autonomy and therefore unsafe. Many of our students will abide by a definition of felt safety that includes having control and autonomy. If a student is dysregulated, we may not want to use declarative language but rather stick to imperative language. Declarative language is meant to prompt thinking, and students will need to be rational and have the mental energy to engage in that thinking.

However, the key, as always, is getting to know your students and to seek to understand their needs and wants when they are not in a place to communicate those pro-socially.



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Declarative language is one tool in your toolbox that can support approaching situations and students in a non-threatening and non-judgmental way when the student is in a place to work through the solutions and has strategies to call upon.

Some Key Takeaways from “*Declarative Language Handbook*”

Murphy highlights several key benefits of using declarative language in the classroom:

1. Encourages Independent Thinking – Students learn to process information, problem-solve, and make decisions on their own. Teachers can model the thinking that happens when observing their environment and making decisions within various situations. Students can take that model and practice applying that thinking to shift their own thinking patterns and observations.
2. Fosters a Sense of Autonomy and Perceived Control – Using neutral and non-judgmental tone and allowing for choices, removes a threat to autonomy that many neurodivergent students struggle with managing.
3. Reduces Power Struggles – Removing direct commands helps minimize resistance and promotes a more cooperative classroom atmosphere. It can allow space for students to navigate choices and decisions, which can shift the focus from compliance to connection.
4. Supports Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) – Declarative statements model emotional regulation, self-awareness, and empathy. It is a conversation and collaboration and makes space to both model and build those key skills.
5. Fosters Intrinsic Motivation – Encouraging students to make choices leads to more meaningful engagement with learning tasks. Being able to manage choices and be successful in learning, is within itself an intrinsic motivation.
6. Enhances Executive Functioning – Students develop cognitive flexibility, impulse control, and working memory as they interpret and act on declarative language. Declarative language can prompt the student to observe, assess, and solve a situation instead of being given the solution. “Declarative language, the strategy, is a way of giving a verbal cue so that the recipient is prompted to think of a solution, not prompted with the solution.” – Elise Wulff, MEd



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Implementing Declarative Language in the Classroom

Teachers can integrate declarative language into daily interactions using simple but effective strategies:

1. Make Observations Instead of Commands

- Instead of: *"Stop running!"*
- Try: *"I notice some students are walking safely in the hallway."*

2. Express Curiosity to Engage Students

- Instead of: *"Finish your worksheet now."*
- Try: *"I wonder what would happen if we solved this next problem together?"*

3. Use Self-Talk to Model Thought Processes

- Instead of: *"Go clean up your desk."*
- Try: *"I like how it feels when my workspace is organized. It helps me find what I need."*

4. Invite Reflection and Discussion

- Instead of: *"Apologize to your friend."*
- Try: *"I wonder how your friend felt when that happened?"*

5. Acknowledge Effort and Progress

- Instead of: *"Good job!"*
- Try: *"I noticed how you kept trying different ways to solve that problem."*

Conclusion

Declarative language is a transformative tool that empowers students to think independently, develop social-emotional skills, and engage more deeply in learning. By shifting from direct commands to statements that encourage observation and reflection, teachers create a more positive and collaborative classroom environment. Educators can embrace this approach to foster student growth, autonomy, and meaningful learning experiences.



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Some Additional Resources for Declarative Language

Nuances of implementation can be the key to an educator's success with declarative language. This podcast offers insight into "When Declarative Language Activates the Nervous System".

<https://www.kristyforbes.com.au/podcasts/intune-pathways-the-podcast/episodes/2148596801>

"Using Declarative Language to Support Independence" by Elise Wulff, MEd

<https://www.massgeneral.org/children/aspire/blog/using-declarative-language-to-support-independence>

"The Declarative Language Handbook" by Linda K. Murphy and her website

<https://www.declarativelanguage.com/>

Follow @atpeaceparents Casey Ehrlich, Ph.D on TikTok or YouTube

Quick Video Example of how to use declarative language with a PDA child

<https://youtu.be/iqmAQQFUNYY>