Social and Emotional Learning Program: The Effective Teacher Language Course

Teachers' Perceptions of the Effective Teacher Language Course Curriculum

What is the Effective Teacher Language course?

The Effective Teacher Language (ETL) course is a component of the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Program for teachers in the Austin Independent School District (AISD) and was created in the fall of 2018 by Aleza Sitarz, an SEL specialist. Teachers are able to complete this online course for a Professional Learning Exchange Day. The ETL course is designed to promote teachers' use of proactive language (reminding and reinforcing) and reduce their reliance on reactive language (redirecting), in order to help students develop confidence, independence, and self-reflection.

The three learning intentions for the ETL course are:

1. To explore the power of teacher language and its effect on students
2. To understand and practice effective language to encourage self-efficacy, self-management, and responsible decision making by students
3. To apply proactive approaches to reminding, reinforcing, and redirecting

The ETL course follows the Responsive Classroom approach of supporting the use of proactive language and minimizing reactive language (Denton, 2014). A hallmark of proactive, reinforcing language is refraining from personal approval and from singling out students when giving praise. Reminding language is brief, is neutral, and aids the child's ability to remember on his or her own. Reactive, redirecting language conveys direct and specific instruction and is meant to be used only 10% of the time.

The ETL course includes several short videos of teachers modeling effective language in real classrooms, interactive discussion boards between course participants, and several short quizzes. Teachers are able to download material containing examples of ways to speak and to begin sentences in different teaching scenarios.

Why examine teachers' perceptions of the ETL course?

As part of the ongoing evaluation of AISD's SEL program, the Department of Research and Evaluation (DRE) assesses teachers' perceptions of SEL implementation at their school and of their own SEL skills.

What are teachers' perceptions of the ETL course?

Upon completion of the ETL course, teachers were able to provide feedback through a four-question survey. A total of 454 teachers completed the course in the 2018–2019 school year and 301 teachers completed the course feedback survey. Most teachers were from the elementary level (n = 343), followed by high school (n = 56), middle school (n = 53), multilevel special education (n = 1) and pre-kindergarten (n = 1). Compared with the teacher

education level distribution district wide, the sample who participated in ETL had about 20% more teachers from the elementary level.

Teachers indicated their responses, using a 5-point scale, to two questions: a) How useful was this learning experience for you? and b) How confident do you feel about being able to follow through with what you learned today? (Figure 1). Results show the vast majority of teachers found the course curriculum to be useful and felt confident they could apply it in their own classroom.

Figure 1.

Most teachers believed content was useful and felt confident in their ability to apply it.

How useful was this learning experience for you?

How confident do you feel about being able to follow through with what you learned today?

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

■ Very ■ Mostly ■ Neutral ■ Somewhat ■ Not at all
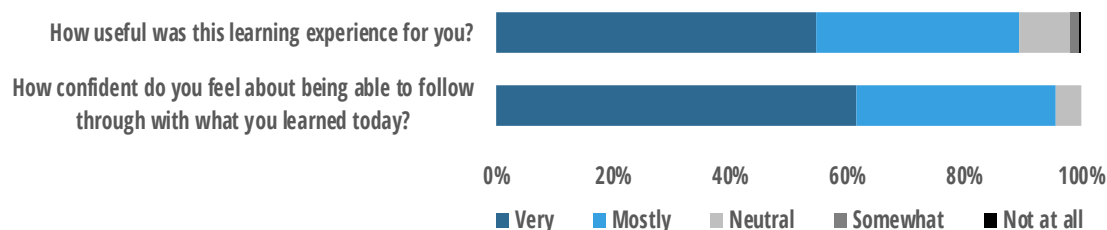
Source. ETL course feedback survey; data collected August 19, 2019.

Additionally, teachers answered two open-ended questions: a) What about this course was most useful? and b) What suggestions do you have? (Figure 2). Of the 301 teachers who completed the course survey, 265 gave responses for what they found to be most useful from the course.

The first question regarding usefulness garnered a variety of responses. About 50% of teachers said they felt the inclusion of videos and language examples in the course curriculum was most useful.

Figure 2.

A word cloud of common themes in teachers' responses to the open-ended question "What about this course was most useful?"

Positive language **Videos** Everything

Examples **Remind, reinforce & redirect material**

PDF/Downloadables

Course design & set-up Provoking self-reflection

Review of material I knew Discussion with other participants

Direct & concise language Importance of language in the classroom

Source. ETL course feedback survey; data collected August 19, 2019.

Note. The size of themes represents the percentage of responses that fit the theme; larger words/phrases have higher percentages of fitting responses and smaller ones have lower percentages. The size ratio of words/phrases was created to be loosely proportionate to theme trends. This word cloud does not include responses that fell into the "other" theme category (n = 7).

The second open-ended question asked teachers to provide suggestions to improve the course. The vast majority of teachers said they did not have any suggestions or simply did not respond (*n* = 221). Of the 77 teachers who responded, 55% gave suggestions that called for including more examples of different classroom scenarios and age groups in the curriculum. Other responses included comments about disliking the discussion boards (*n* = 6) and specific course set-up confusion or dislike (*n* = 6), while some asked for more content and the creation of related courses (*n* = 6).

Conclusion

The vast majority of teachers who participated in the ETL course found it to be useful, felt confident in applying the material in their own class and desired more information and opportunities to learn related material.

What's next for the Effective Teacher Language course and beyond?

Teachers' responses on the feedback survey for the ETL course will be used to make improvements to the course curriculum, and the feedback surveys will continue to be given for the foreseeable future. Future plans include updating the ETL course video content, which some teachers suggested lacked examples of various teaching settings and contexts (see Figure 2). The goal is to obtain video footage from actual AISD teachers to use as replacements. To create these replacement videos, video footage will be recorded in classrooms with teachers versed in ETL and will include examples in both the elementary and secondary levels.

Based on the relatively high enrollment in the ETL course, it is clear that Professional Learning Exchange Day opportunities are a popular option for teachers. In the feedback survey, teachers also indicated an interest in enrolling in similar courses with related themes. In response, a Peace Areas and Peace Path SEL course is currently being created, and both courses will be offered for Professional Learning Exchange Days. Additional courses related to the SEL elements of Three Signature Practices, How to Build a Relationship Based Classroom, and SEL in Staff Meetings will be created at a later date.

References

Denton, P. (2014, January 3). Reinforcing, reminding, and redirecting. Excerpt adapted from *The power of our words* (Turners Falls, MA: Center for Responsive Schools). Retrieved from https://www.responsiveclassroom.org reinforcing-reminding-and-redirecting/

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