

Using Declarative Language with Students: Building Engagement, Independence, and Buy-In

A Practical Guide for Educators

Purpose & Rationale

Declarative language is a communication approach that focuses on sharing observations, thoughts, and intentions rather than directing students with commands. This approach can be especially effective for students with autism, ADHD, anxiety, or those who struggle with compliance-based interactions. By shifting to declarative language, educators foster student autonomy, reduce power struggles, and encourage problem-solving and social engagement.

Declarative vs. Directive Language

Directive Language (Traditional)	Declarative Language (Engagement-Focused)
Sit down now.	Looks like everyone's finding a place to sit.
Get your math book.	I'm getting my math book so we can start together.
Stop talking.	I notice it's getting noisy. I'm going to wait until it's quiet to keep going.
Line up.	It's time to head out. I'll meet you at the door.
Put your phone away.	We're starting an activity that doesn't need phones.

Why Declarative Language Works

- Shifts the interaction from compliance to collaboration.
- Reduces anxiety and resistance by removing demands.
- Encourages students to observe, process, and respond.
- Models problem-solving and self-regulation language.
- Supports development of executive functioning skills.

Classroom-Ready Sentence Stems

- “I’m wondering what will happen if…”
- “I notice…”
- “It looks like…”
- “I’m thinking we could…”
- “I see that…”
- “Let’s find out…”
- “I wonder if we can…”

Before and After: Language Swap Examples

Before (Directive)	After (Declarative)
Don’t run in the hall.	We walk in the hall so everyone stays safe.
Stop interrupting.	I’m interested in hearing what you have to say when it’s your turn.
Do your homework now.	I’m going to set my materials out so I’m ready to start the homework.
Quiet down.	I notice the volume is high — let’s bring it down so we can hear each other.

Implementation Checklist

- Identify 2–3 common directives you use and reframe them into declarative statements.
- Practice pausing after making a declarative statement to allow student processing time.
- Model curiosity and problem-solving through your language.
- Use declarative language consistently across contexts (classroom, hallways, recess).
- Share the approach with colleagues and families for consistency.

Common Pitfalls & How to Avoid Them

- Using declarative language but still embedding hidden commands: keep statements neutral.
- Switching back to directives under stress: practice declarative phrasing ahead of time.
- Expecting instant compliance: the goal is engagement and thinking, not immediate action.

Action Starter: Try Tomorrow

- Choose one high-frequency directive you give and reframe it declaratively for tomorrow.
- Observe how students respond and note changes in engagement or resistance.
- Share one positive outcome with a colleague to encourage practice.

Concepts in this resource are informed by the Declarative Language Handbook by Linda K. Murphy (<https://www.declarativelanguage.com>).