

■ 1 Being supportive

I want the learners in my class to realise that I value them and care about them – which I really do. It's just that I'm not sure how to show it, or how appropriate it is to show it.

Aim

To show support to your students by affirming them and their worth.

Introduction

By creating an overtly supportive environment, you help your students to feel valued and in doing so, you help them to value themselves.

Being supportive is perhaps the crucial foundation stone to everything you do in class. If students feel valued and respected, this will result in good rapport. A positive classroom atmosphere will inevitably affect students' attitude towards the work they do in class and their level of engagement with the language.

Techniques: Showing support

Humans often feel great support for others, but can be reticent in showing it or stating it. But it's very powerful to say something supportive and can do a great deal to enhance the other person's self-esteem.

1 Paying attention

Attention is one of the most powerful gifts a person can give someone else. Make eye contact. Clear your head of your own concerns, your worries, random thoughts and distractions. Feel that all your energy is available for paying attention to the other person in a relaxed, unthreatening, supportive way. You can do this even if the other person is not speaking. You can show that you are *with* them, just in a look or a stance. On the receiving end, people blossom in the warm glow of this attention. It is very powerful, yet rather underestimated as a factor in classroom life. Just one warning: you have to feel it, not role play what you think it should look like. Beware of overdoing it, overacting.

2 Affirm and validate

Give a simple, clear, affirming comment to someone in your class. For example, tell a student something that you really like about the way that they behave in class. Say it as simply and clearly as you can. Be very concise rather than rambling at length; one short sentence is best. You could start, 'I really like the way ...'.

3 Be specific

Respond to a student's work, not with general bland praise, but stating specific things you have noticed about the work they put in or the scale of their achievement – such as how much time you observed them spend on the task or the number of new expressions they used. You could start 'I noticed that you ...'.

4 Support not flattery

Be careful that what you offer is genuine support and not simply unrealistic flattery or vague praise.

Techniques: Being supportive in different ways

Being supportive doesn't only mean saying positive things. You can show support in everything you do and say, even the smallest, most apparently insignificant actions, passing comments and reactions. Rather than just saying things automatically, decide that you want to convey them with an added element of support.

1 Use people's names

Add names to comments and questions when appropriate, e.g. 'What do you think, Heidi?' feels more personal than 'What do you think?' Avoid overdoing it, as it can quickly sound false, e.g. 'Well, Marcel, I thought this was interesting. What do you think, Marcel?'

2 Good morning!

Imbue everyday greetings with genuine warmth. When students arrive at your class, say 'Hello' or 'Welcome' in a way that lets them know that you really mean it. Ask how they are. Engage in chat. Let them know that you do care about them.

3 Everyday interaction

Similarly, add a depth of support into all of your regular interactions. Try experimenting with how much support you can add into everyday words or phrases like 'yes' or 'Start now'.

4 Make eye contact

Don't avoid people's eyes. If you are low in confidence, it can be tempting to look at and talk to the room in general. On the receiving end, this will feel increasingly cold and distant. Get into regular, positive, warm, encouraging eye contact (as opposed to threatening or 'I'm watching you' eye contact) with as many students as possible.

5 Smile at people (lots)

As well as general, aimed-at-the-whole-class smiling, regularly direct warm smiles to individuals (and not just the good ones who cause you least bother). The act of smiling releases endorphins that actually make you feel like smiling!

6 Demonstrate that you enjoy being with them

Be someone who visibly enjoys what you do, what they do, what they say, things that go wrong. Do what you might do in the company of friends. Laugh at your own silliness. Sigh comically when you drop your pen. Use any gestures or expressions that come naturally to you.

7 Show support when the news is bad

If you have to convey negative results or bad news, make sure that the hearer knows that you fully support them and continue to believe in them.

8 Look outside the classroom

Show consideration for problems learners might have external to the class. Trust rather than be suspicious.

Technique: Support at specific moments

There will be many moments in your teaching day when you can show support to individual students, for example:

- 1 If you notice a student putting a lot of energy and attention into their work, comment on it.
- 2 If a student takes an active role in a group task, notice it and tell them that you have noticed it.
- 3 If a student does a good piece of work, put it in the noticeboard or washing line (see Chapter 1 Unit 8), or read it out.
- 4 If something is good, put positive reactions on written work; don't get locked into only commenting on negatives and errors.
- 5 If you spot a learner who is switched off and isn't doing anything, try genuinely asking if they are OK. Find out whether you can help, rather than automatically telling them off for laziness.

Questions for reflection

- Do you explicitly tell students what you like about how they work, or are your comments reserved only for the work they produce?
- How much do you make a point of picking out factual positive things to draw attention to and convey to students?
- When you add a stronger element of support, is there a point at which you start to sound insincere? Experiment, and find the best amount you can add to remain natural and without it sounding false or overdone.