

Do Teacher's Words Matter? Effects of Inclusive Language Use on Student Perceptions

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Introduction

- ❖ The AAC&U challenges higher education to address diversity, inclusion, and equity through making excellence inclusive.
- ❖ Although many educators endorse the importance of inclusivity, they often lament that they are unsure of how to create more inclusive classroom spaces and request specific strategies for doing so.
- ❖ This study examines the effects of utilizing inclusive language on student perceptions of instructors, predictions of levels of comfort in the classroom, and willingness to enroll in the course.

Methods

- ❖ **Participants:** 350 college students randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions.
- ❖ **Condition 1:**
 - Syllabus with a statement regarding the instructor's commitment to inclusivity
 - Sample exam items that utilize inclusive (i.e., same-sex couple), diverse (i.e., names representative of minority cultures), and people-first language (i.e., children with special needs rather than special needs children)
- ❖ **Condition 2:**
 - Syllabus without a statement regarding inclusivity
 - Sample exam items that utilize neutral language and examples, leaving interpretation of the items up to the reader (i.e., gender neutral couples, referring to "parents" rather than "mom and dad")
- ❖ **Condition 3:**
 - Syllabus with a statement regarding inclusivity
 - Sample exam items that utilize neutral language and examples (see above)
- ❖ **Condition 4:**
 - Syllabus without a statement regarding inclusivity
 - Sample exam items that utilize exclusive language and examples most relevant to those from privileged identity statuses (i.e., opposite sex couples, European names, and stereotypical representations of gender, race, etc....)

Inclusivity Statement Used in Conditions 1 and 3:

In order to learn, we must be open to the views of people different from ourselves. Each and every voice in the classroom is important and brings with it a wealth of experiences, values, and beliefs. In this class, people of all ethnicities, genders and gender identities, religions, ages, sexual orientations, disabilities, socioeconomic backgrounds, religions, and nationalities are strongly encouraged to share their rich array of perspectives and experiences. In this time we share together over the semester, please honor the uniqueness of your fellow classmates, and appreciate the opportunity we have to learn from each other. Please respect your fellow students' identities and refrain from personal attacks or demeaning comments of any kind.

Sample Exam Items

Condition 1:

1. Malia is 10 years of age, and her abuela, Anna Rosa, is 60 years old. Which statement is likely to be true concerning their sleep patterns?
2. Michael's mothers, LaShonda and Mai, are physicists, and so are the parents of several of his best friends. Therefore, Michael believes that many people are employed as physicists. Michael's reasoning is based on:
3. Dimitri and Jamal are trying to learn a new routine to compete successfully in a cheerleading competition. Give an example of how each of the following could affect their performance.

Conditions 2 and 3:

1. Casey is 10 years of age, and her grandparent, Jo is 60 years old. Which statement is likely to be true concerning their sleep patterns?
2. Taylor's parents, Pat and Chris, are physicists, and so are the parents of several of Taylor's best friends. Therefore, Taylor believes that many people are employed as physicists. Taylor's reasoning is based on:
3. Bobbie and Sam are trying to learn a new routine to compete successfully in a cheerleading competition. Give an example of how each of the following could affect their performance.

Condition 4:

1. Brittany is 10 years of age, and her grandmother, Elizabeth, is 60 years old. Which statement is likely to be true concerning their sleep patterns?
2. Matthew's parents, Katie and Ryan, are physicists, and so are the parents of several of his best friends. Therefore, Matthew believes that many people are employed as physicists. Matthew's reasoning is based on:
3. Emma and Chelsea are trying to learn a new routine to compete successfully in a cheerleading competition. Give an example of how each of the following could affect their performance.

Results

Participant Perception Questions

Based on the Sample Course Materials:

Percent who would feel comfortable in the course & Percent who are likely to enroll this specific course section

	Condition 1	Condition 2	Condition 3	Condition 4
Comfort	47%	53%	56%	68%
Enroll	64%	66%	75%	76%

Condition 1

Positive Comments:

- I like that the instructor uses inclusive language in both the syllabus and test questions, and test questions include LGBT, culturally diverse, and other minorities.
- I believe I would feel a high level of comfort in this course based on how the scenarios are worded and explained.
- The different subjects that were mentioned don't bother me, such as a girl having a girlfriend.
- I like that It said that there needs to be respect for everyone.
- None of the questions offended me in anyway.
- The professor also seems very nice.
- I need to enroll in this particular section of the course.

Negative Comments:

- The only reason I wasn't totally comfortable is because of the "out there" scenarios presented in some questions, not because of any minority representation.
- I would not like this because the course refers to sexual orientation.
- Although this may be appealing to others, by reading some of those questions I would be very hesitant to take this section. I would look for another.
- Since I am unsure about the questions, I would enroll only if it was the only option.
- This professor seems a little wacky as evidenced to me by certain scenarios presented, and I prefer straightforward instructors.

Condition 2

- No mention of anything related to inclusivity, diversity, or specific to course materials, exam items, or the instructor.

Condition 3

- The class seems to provide a safe environment for everyone.
- The professor seems nice and very accepting and open to differences.
- The syllabus showed the professor's respect for all students.
- Professor seems open about other people's opinions.
- The professor seems like they care for the students and their success.

Condition 4

- The syllabus was easy to understand as were the test questions. Use of names/people situations makes it easier to apply concepts.
- Questions are fathomable and easy to study.
- Straightforward syllabus and test questions
- All seemed easily applied to everyday situations.
- The questions were put together nicely.
- The test questions seemed very interesting.
- The language in the syllabus makes the teacher seem friendly and interested in her class.
- it is interesting with specific examples to keep me engaged in my learning
- It is very straight forward and most questions are just application questions.
- I would enroll in this section because the schedule is well organized and the professor seems to know what he/she is doing.

Discussion

- ❖ Condition 4 had the greatest percentage of participants endorse feeling comfortable and being willing to enroll in the course section despite no focus on inclusivity. Participants noted overall positive views of the course materials and the instructor.
- ❖ Condition 1 had the lowest percentage of participants endorse feeling comfortable and being willing to enroll in the course section despite a strong inclusivity focus. Participants had strongly mixed reviews of the course materials and instructor with some finding the section to be highly appealing and others finding it to be aversive.
- ❖ Condition 3 participants had the second highest percentage of participants endorse feeling comfortable and being willing to enroll in the course section. The language neutrality resulted in participant perceptions of a safe classroom environment and a caring and respectful instructor.
- ❖ Conclusion: Teachers words do matter! Use of an inclusivity statement on the course syllabus along with neutral language examples and exam items appears to hold potential for accommodating comfort levels of all students while promoting inclusive excellence.