

“Eduspeak” Reconsidered

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When, Why, and to Whom Is Educational Jargon Annoying?

By Alfie Kohn

Over the years I’ve heard a lot of people complain – sometimes good-naturedly, sometimes with remarkable venom – about our field’s use of jargon. Eventually I began to wonder why “eduspeak” or “edspeak” (or, less charitably, “edu-babble”) vexes people so, and to what extent that reaction is justified.

We should begin by acknowledging that just about every vocation has its own lingo: Physicians and plumbers, actors and accountants, judges and journalists all converse in a shorthand riddled with acronyms that’s nearly indecipherable to others. Why do they do so? Presumably because it saves time, or because it helps them bond with one another and feel part of an exclusive club, or maybe because they eventually forget that the terms they’re using *are* jargon.

When does this become objectionable? Sometimes the lingo itself can be off-putting, particularly if it consists of buzzwords that are imprecise, clichéd, or gratingly euphemistic. (Think of the abstractions that corporations use to describe firing workers.) But just as often, those of us on the outside recoil less because of the terms themselves than

because of the context in which they're bandied about. We grumble when the tribalism shades into elitism, when the users of jargon seem to be advertising how important they are by virtue of what they know that we don't, when their speech smacks of pretentiousness and posturing.

Mostly, though, we react because we don't understand what the hell they're talking about. If we hear them conversing with each other and can't follow along, that's a little frustrating. But if they're still using impenetrable jargon when they talk to us, then what we've got here is a failure to communicate – and that's just maddening. We may begin to suspect they don't *want* us to understand.

To be fair, it makes sense that some words will be unfamiliar to those who lack the background in what may be a complicated field. Depending on the situation, it's either your responsibility to learn what those words mean or (when you're the client, patient or customer) it's their responsibility to explain. And in the latter case, we're understandably put out when they don't.

Even more annoying is the tendency to use specialized, members-only terms even when ordinary words exist that mean pretty much the same thing. To say that a patient is "afebrile, with no incident of syncope" just means the guy doesn't have a fever and didn't faint. If doctors talk like that around laypeople, it arouses the suspicion that obfuscation is a feature rather than a bug. Perhaps people in any field ought to pause periodically to consider whether a given example of obscure nomenclature is justified. Could the idea it captures be expressed more simply and therefore more accessibly?¹

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All of these varied considerations would seem to apply to educators. What's striking, though, is how often critics of

eduspeak lump together very different objections – and how often the crankiest of them fail to distinguish between useful and useless nomenclature. In other words, they don't ask whether there's a good reason for using a term that isn't widely known.

As in other domains, the jargon itself sometimes produces the effect of dragging fingernails down a blackboard. In September 2022, *Education Week* conducted an informal survey on social media, inviting submissions of the field's most irritating buzzwords. The numerous responses included "rigor," "fidelity," "grit," "learning loss," and "accountability." But it's not clear whether people were reacting to the terms themselves, judging them to be murky or overused, or to something more substantive, such as pressure to comply with dubious mandates. In the latter case, the language is just a tool to facilitate that obnoxious process. Notice that most of the complainers here were presumably educators themselves.

The situation is somewhat different when educators toss around terms that outsiders have trouble deciphering. Is it preferable to use simpler language? My answer is: Only when simpler language is adequate to convey the same idea, which isn't always the case. Strunk and White's advice to writers has merit – "omit needless words"; "use definite, specific, concrete language" – but that's not an argument to oversimplify or to indulge people who are instinctively suspicious of new or complicated ideas.

Assessment, for example, is not an unnecessarily fancy synonym for *testing*. Tests are just one way of assessing how well students are learning. Indeed, it's only when you understand both words, the familiar one and the less-familiar one, that you'll be likely to ask whether testing is necessary in order to determine how well our kids (and schools) are doing.² Similarly, terms like criterion- and norm-referenced testing have very specific meanings and no obvious colloquial

translation. Teachers and administrators ought to help parents understand what such words mean – in contrast to leaving them confused, but also in contrast to dispensing with language just because someone dismisses it as “edubabble.”

Truly impenetrable and unnecessary jargon in education does exist, but it’s more often used by academics who are not necessarily trying to communicate to the general public (although perhaps they should).³ It’s not fair to tar the whole field, including K-12 teachers, with charges of eduspeak if the real culprits tend to work in universities and publish in small journals – just like their equally insular colleagues in chemistry, literary criticism, and other disciplines.

Which brings us to the question of why there seems to be so much more resentment about the use of jargon in our field than in others. If the answer is that more transparency is expected when our kids are involved, that parents are entitled to understand what their children’s teachers are talking about, that seems fair. But why don’t we see the same kind of annoyance when pediatricians slip into medspeak? Might it be because medicine is understood to require specialized knowledge, whereas education is widely thought to be something anyone can do? “Hey, we all went to school; it’s not that complicated. So if I don’t understand something that teachers say, it must be because they’re putting on airs and overcomplicating it.” (This is related to a reactionary view that equates education with the transmission of information – teaching by telling, learning by absorption – such that anyone who knows a lot about science is qualified to teach it.)

Consider terms such as “developmentally appropriate” or “constructivism” or “student-centered.” If people roll their eyes in response to them, are they saying, (a) “I’m confused about what these words mean,” (b) “They’re clumsy expressions,” (c) “I think they’re being overused,” or (d) “They sound progressive, and I don’t like progressive

practices"?⁴

My hunch is that the last option is often correct, an impression bolstered by reviewing many of the most virulent attacks on eduspeak.⁵ If that's true, then we could present these critics with a lucidly written glossary explaining the unfamiliar terms and it wouldn't help because what's eliciting ridicule isn't really the jargon but the substance that the jargon is describing.⁶ (Ironically, this suggests a misdirection on the part of traditionalists that exemplifies the very lack of transparency they attribute to educators.)

In sum, I'm arguing that not all of our lingo can or should be replaced with simpler words. Nor would everyone who criticizes it be satisfied with greater clarity. Nevertheless, educators, like other professionals, have a responsibility to communicate as clearly as possible with people outside their field. It's a matter of basic courtesy to elucidate terms that may be puzzling to others even though we've come to take them for granted. And that clarity may also help more people to understand why traditional practices so often fall short and thus to build a constituency for change.

NOTES

1. I would propose a similar test for scholars and other writers in the English-speaking world regarding the temptation to pepper their prose with words and phrases from other languages. To me, these are not irritating per se, but only when they're gratuitous. Take Latin. *Ad hominem*? *Mutatis mutandis*? *Sine qua non*? *Per se*? These we'll allow either because they're widely understood or because the concept is cumbersome to explain in the vernacular. But *annus horribilis*? *Ergo*? *Eo ipso*? Here there are obvious English substitutes, so stop advertising the fact that you went to an

expensive college. The same applies to German: *Schadenfreude* is acceptable; *Weltanschauung* is not (because “world view” is close enough). Likewise French: There’s no precise English equivalent for *l’esprit de l’escalier* (although it’s sufficiently exotic that, like *mutatis mutandis*, it should be used sparingly), but why would you ever use *rite du passage* when you could just say “rite of passage.” I’ve got about sixty other examples, but lengthy endnotes should also be used sparingly, *n’est pas?*

2. It isn’t.

3. Elsewhere, I’ve written that anyone who wishes to challenge the status quo must “speak and write in a language that is widely understood. Some scholars have slipped so far into the stylized talk – excuse me, *discourse* – of academia that important ideas are rendered virtually incomprehensible to most people. Because it sometimes seems that scholarship is valued by other academics in direct proportion to its inaccessibility, some individuals may have an instinctive aversion to writing in simple sentences even if they could remember how to do so. The reality is that we contribute usefully to a discussion about [standardized] testing when we explain clearly why higher scores do not necessarily signal better learning. We do not contribute usefully when we ramble on to a general audience about point-biserial correlations – or, for that matter, about liberatory praxis and neoliberal hegemony.”

4. Words like these make me uneasy for a very different reason: They once signified a meaningfully progressive version of education but have been co-opted by people whose approach is anything but.

5. It would be interesting to investigate whether this is also true of criticisms of “psychobabble” – that is, the extent to which mockery of the language psychologists often use is disproportionately offered by conservatives who object to

psychological explanations on the grounds that they're thought to displace moral judgments or stoicism in the face of difficulties.

6. Similarly, the phrase "so-called experts" is usually just a way of dismissing experts who say things with which the speaker disagrees – a way of denigrating a view one doesn't care for without having to offer a substantive argument, much like describing an article or book as a "rant," "screed," or "diatribe" that "bashes" the position one prefers.

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