



Speaking Your Student's Language

John Daw

GCSE Maths Resit Lecturer

Sheffield College

What Communication Are Our Students Used To?

Many FE maths resit students arrive with:

- repeated experiences of failure
- maths anxiety and avoidance
- low trust in classroom participation
- a belief that 'maths isn't for people like me'

Communication is not just words and actions.
It shapes motivation, identity and participation.

Caption Competition



What Is The Main Communication Barrier?

Teachers often communicate mathematically.

Students often communicate emotionally.

Teacher: “Have another go.”

Student hears: “You’ve got it wrong again.”

Teacher: “Any questions?”

Student hears: “Please don’t expose yourself.”

How could we rephrase?

Instead of:

“Wrong”

“Who knows the answer?”

“Any questions?”

Try:

“Talk me through your thinking”

“What are you noticing?”

“What feels unclear so far?”

Which phrases unintentionally close communication down?

What Is The Main Communication Barrier?

If you talk to students without understanding them, you can find yourself speaking to them about subjects they don't care about in a way they cannot access

– Hall (2022)

How could we rephrase?

Instead of:

“Wrong”

“Who knows the answer?”

“Any questions?”

Try:

“Talk me through your thinking”

“What are you noticing?”

“What feels unclear so far?”

Which phrases unintentionally close communication down?

What Stops Our Students From Communicating?

Research into maths anxiety shows students avoid participation when classrooms feel evaluative.

Common barriers:

- fear of embarrassment
- speed culture
- public correction
- previous school experiences
- teacher dominance of talk

‘I don’t hate maths, I hate how maths lessons make me feel’

Whose voice dominates your room?

So What Do Our Students Want?

Students commonly describe wanting:

honesty

empathy

clarity

relevance

reduced judgement

opportunities to talk through ideas

slower pace

Which of these breaks down first under pressure?

When Cognitive Overload Increases, Communication Quality Decreases

FE students often arrive tired, overstimulated or frustrated.

Research suggests structured breaks can improve efficiency and mood, although implementation matters. — Biwer et al. (2023)

Question:

What does a 'productive reset' look like in maths lessons?

What Do We Mean By Pomodoro Breaks?

A Pomodoro break is a mandatory, short rest period (typically 3–5 minutes) taken after every 25 minutes of focused work. Ross (2022)

But overly rigid systems can interrupt productive focus. — Smits et al. (2025)

Low-Stakes Communication Window - A strategic pause where you lower the cognitive demand, allow informal peer discussion and reduce cognitive pressure.

The Power — and Risk — of Contextualisation

“Authentic post-16 mathematics experiences”
improve engagement. — Boli (2025)

Strategies:

- vocational examples
- workplace communication scenarios
- visual explanations
- practical estimation tasks

What is the worst attempt at contextualisation
you have done?

Let's Develop Our Communication

-  Assign yourself roles (Engineer, Supplier, Builder).
-  Your task is to build the LEGO kit you have been given.
-  Only the Engineer can see the instructions, only the Supplier can find the pieces and only the Builder can build.
-  What created clarity?
-  What caused confusion?
-  How does this mirror maths classrooms?

Our Communication Decides:

- Whether they belong
- Whether they feel safe to contribute
- Whether maths still feels 'for people like them'

Communication is not an 'extra' in FE maths resit.

Remember

Teachers often communicate mathematically.

Students often communicate emotionally.

What is one change you could
make tomorrow that would
improve communication in
your classroom?

