

The Power of Words in Transforming Conflict

Today, popular media bombards audiences, including children, with programs full of violent language. For example, sarcastic put-downs and insults only lightly coated in humor characterize many popular family sit-coms. In order to counteract negative communication models, good children's literature is an excellent medium for language learning, as it is full of examples of real-life language. It can be used to show the power of words, both positive and negative, and their role in conflict.¹

*Two Monsters*² is a useful children's literary work for English language acquisition and perspective-taking. It is a story about two monsters who reside on opposite sides of a mountain and communicate through a small hole in a rock. Seeds of conflict are sown when one evening the first monster calls his neighbor's attention to 'the beautiful sunset'. The second monster points out that his neighbor is mistaken and that what he sees is 'the moonrise'. That evening neither one sleeps well and the next morning their disagreement quickly escalates, from a virulent exchange of insults to the destruction of the whole mountain.

Note: *Two Monsters* is somewhat controversial because it can actually teach children new insulting expressions e.g. "numbskull" and "pea brain," yet it shows how words can contribute to conflict escalation and provides an excellent medium for teaching positive communication, tone and perspective-taking.

¹ For the *Socially Responsible Language Teaching Using Literature*, Kaarina Ghosn, Irma. Language Teacher, March 2003. See "Ghosn, 2003" at <http://www.jalt-publications.org/ilt/articles>

² *Two Monsters*, McKee, D. Andersen Press, London, 1985. Available in paperback.

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Age Range: Elementary to secondary school students (age 7 and up)

Subject: The activity has been used in primary school English as a Second Language classes in grades 4 and 5 (ages 8-10) and develops both peace education concepts and language/communication skills.

Materials: Copies of *Two Monsters* (one copy per every four students).

Duration: 50 minutes (can be extended to carry over two or three class periods)

Learning Objectives: Learners will:

- develop an awareness of the power of hurtful words in conflict escalation
- identify positive expressions that can be used to avoid escalation of conflict especially when viewpoints differ
- develop skills of working together
- develop interpersonal communication skills

- develop English language skills

Procedure: Storytelling, Perspective-Taking, Participatory Learning

Step One: Read the story emphatically to the class, stopping at key points to invite predictions. At intervals, ask children to explain what happened and why it happened. In particular, after the demise of the mountain, ask the class:

- Could the destruction of the mountain have been prevented? If so, why?
- *How* could it have been prevented?
- What do you think was the main problem in the story? (A useful prompt includes, *why did the monsters end up using such mean words?*)

Step Two: Guide children to recognize the different viewpoints of the monsters as a critical departure. Using the issue of differing viewpoints, encourage them to come up with suggestions on how the monsters *could have learned something* about each others' viewpoints. Allow space for their imagination.

Step Three: With the children, generate as many positive and polite expressions as they know and teach a few more e.g., *excuse me, what exactly do you mean? can you explain more?, my kind friend,* etc. Once a list of good examples has been created, it is important to emphasize that the tone that accompanies words is an important part of communication, too.

Step Four: Select three of the examples to compare and contrast difference in tone. Read the selected words or phrases, first in a calm, inviting (non accusatory) tone and then, in an

angered, accusatory tone. By a show of hands, ask the children to show you which tone is positive and which is negative. Ask them:

- Why is this tone negative? Why is this tone positive?
- If I use this tone, would you want to talk to me? Why?

Step Five: In small groups, have children re-write the story of the *Two Monsters* to end positively. (Children are likely to begin by trying to change only the different insults to more positive, but will quickly realize that each positive comment changes the subsequent response).

Step Six: Lead a discussion on the experience e.g., what was it like to write a new ending to the story? How did it make you feel? Next, have children practice their new dialogues and present them to the class. Gather new stories into *Our Class Book of Positive Communication*, have children illustrate it.

Step Seven: Depending on cues from the class, you may want to ask children to recount any experiences they might have had where hurtful words were used and what happened.

Evaluation: In addition to practicing positive communication, literature also fosters perspective-taking, an important life skill. I have found that when students have opportunities to talk about and reflect on characters' situations and actions, they begin to understand different perspectives. Written tasks that require students to take on different roles further reinforce the skill. Below is an example of a child's learning through this exercise.

The Friendly Monsters

Adaptation of the Original Story by David McKee, Grade 5

Once upon a time there were two monsters who lived on a mountain. One lived on the west side and the other one lived on the east side. Sometimes they talked together through a small hole in the mountain. One evening the first monster called through the hole, "Hi neighbor! You should see the sunset. It is very beautiful!"

"What do you mean sunset?" called the second monster through the hole. "You mean the moonrise, my good neighbor."

The two monsters did not sleep very well. They were thinking about what the other monster had said. The next morning, the first monster shouted through the hole, "Wake up, my clever neighbor, the moon is leaving."

"What do you mean, my intelligent friend? Do you mean that the sun is rising?"

"No, no, my friend. I mean the moon is leaving. Look through the hole, please."

So, the second monster became curious. It tried to see through the hole but it was too small.

"My dear neighbor, I can only see your shirt. It is very nice and colorful. But I do not see anything else. But I see the sun coming."

"Oh dear!" said the first monster. "We must make the hole bigger. I want to see what you mean."

So the two monsters started to dig with their big claws. They dug and dug all day and till the evening.

They threw the rocks behind them. They hurled them far back. Soon the hole was as big as a door.

"Hello, my hardworking neighbor!" said the first monster. "Come to my side and see the sunset."

"Thank you my nice friend," said the second monster. "You can come to my side and see the moon coming up."

So the two monsters went through the hole to the other monster's side.

"Incredible," said the first monster. "Amazing!" shouted the second monster.

They lived happily ever after and visited each other almost every day.

The End

Variation: The *Two Monsters* and this activity are also useful for older students i.e., 14-18 year old students. Older students often enjoy using children books: they are surprised, first, that they are allowed to use such a nostalgic medium from their childhood and later, that they can discover so much wisdom in these books. The value of children books for all age

groups is that they minimize complexity and tell in the form of a parable much about social relationships and human behavior.

If older students do not feel comfortable because they think this activity is too childish, you can frame the activity with the following question: *How could one use this story in order to help smaller children understand the power of words?*

Suggested Resource:

The Butter Battle Book by Dr. Seuss (Random House Children's Books New York, Toronto, 1984) where two rival groups, the Yooks and Zooks, start an arms race because one group likes to eat its bread with the butter side up, while the other group eats it with the butter side down.

Further Reading:

Language and Peace, Christina Schäffner and Anita Wenden. Aldershot, Hants: Dartmouth, 1995.

Connection: See *Are You A Humanizer?* in Strand Two on International Humanitarian and Human Rights Laws and Institutions.

Two Monsters

By David McKee

There was once a monster that lived quietly on the west side of a mountain. On the east side of the mountain lived another monster. Sometimes the monsters spoke together through a

hole in the mountain. But they never saw each other. One evening the first monster called through the hole, "Can you see how beautiful it is? Day is departing."

"Day departing?" called back the second monster. "You mean night arriving, you twit!"

"Don't call me a twit, you dumbo, or I'll get angry," fumed the first monster and he felt so annoyed that he could hardly sleep. The other monster felt just as irritated and he slept very badly as well.

The next morning the first monster felt awful after such a bad night. He shouted through the hole, "Wake up, you numskull, night is leaving."

"Don't be stupid, you pea brain!" answered the second. "That is day arriving." And with that he picked up a stone and threw it over the mountain.

"Rotten shot, you fat ignoramus!" called the first monster as the stone missed him. He picked up a bigger stone and hurled it back. That stone also missed.

"Hopeless, you hairy, long-nosed nerk!" howled the second monster, and he threw back a rock which knocked the top off the mountain.

"You're just a stupid old wind-filled prune!" shouted the first monster as he heaved a boulder that knocked another piece off the mountain.

"And you're a bandy-legged, soggy cornflake!" replied the second monster. This time he kicked a huge rock just for a change.

As the day passed the rocks grew bigger and bigger and the insults grew longer and longer. Both of the monsters remained untouched but the mountain was being knocked to pieces.

"You're a hairy, overstuffed, empty-headed, boss-eyed mess!" shouted the first monster as he threw yet another massive boulder.

"You're a pathetic, addlebrained, smelly, lily-livered custard tart!" screamed the second monster hurling a yet larger rock. That rock finally smashed the last of the mountain and for the very first time the monsters saw each other. This happened just at the beginning of another sunset.

"Incredible," said the first monster putting down the rock he was holding. "There's night arriving. You were right."

"Amazing," gasped the second monster dropping his boulder. "You are right, it is day leaving."

They walked to the middle of the mess they had made to watch the arrival of the night and the departure of the day together.

“That was rather fun,” giggled the first monster.

“Yes, wasn’t it,” chuckled the second. “Pity about the mountain.”

Mckee, David. *Two Monsters*. United Kingdom: Anderson Press, 1985.