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I Can: The Intersection between Language, Education, and Sports Psychology

Most of us usually think to ourselves using words, meaning we talk to ourselves in our minds. Language, as I've written in previous essays, is a powerful thing. It not only is a tool for communication, but of thought as well, and the words we use affect the nuances of our thoughts, emotions, and of our performance. Having a proper set of vocabulary is essential for understanding our environment. One of my favorite quotes is in Czajkowski's Understanding Fencing where he writes "You can only understand well that to which you can apply language." This makes sense to me, and as I describe it, imagine someone with no understanding of fencing trying to relate to a friend what is happening in a bout. "The guy swung his sword. Something happened and it was so cool! Then the other guy hit him!" Not only can't the person accurately describe the action, he cannot possibly truly understand the techniques and tactics being employed by the fencers because he doesn't know what he's seeing or even for what to look.

In my coaching clinics I teach the use of internal vs external language, based on concepts from Nick Winkelman's The Language of Coaching: The Art and Science of Teaching Movement, published in 2020. External references, as you may know, produces better results than internal references. (Internal language makes reference to the person's body. External language references the person's environment.) A coach should say "Reach towards the target." instead of "Extend your arm." Similarly, the use of analogy and the use of emotional words are very effective. "Blast up to the ceiling like a rocket!" says a lot more to the athlete you are training than "Jump up." You can also see my previous article* where I discussed how we can choose our words carefully when we teach beginners so that they can from the beginning take control of the footwork and set traps for the opponent. Again and again we see power of carefully chosen language.

Today, we'll be looking at two simple words that take on a lot of power when spoken in a certain order. "I can." Placed the other way, as "Can I?" we'd have an entirely different essay. The words "I can." express a belief in oneself, a statement of ability, and imply some sort of specific skill or ability that is the object of the statement, meaning "I can X." We all too often hear "I can't" from our students. They may be in a lesson, have done the action correctly six times, then flub it on the seventh and they say with frustration "I can't do this." My response is usually, "You just did it six times, so obviously you can. You're just disappointed that you didn't do it on that particular try. Give yourself some credit for the six you got right and focus on the positive." Focusing on the positive is generally considered far better than focusing on the negative, especially when we look at what we have learned in sports psychology. As we know, positive self-talk is vitally important for suppressing and eliminating negative self-talk. The positive self-talk must be phrases or statements that we believe to be true, else our internal BS meters will alarm and we'll sabotage the whole process. The trick is, in the case of the student taking the lesson, to get them to acknowledge and believe that they "can." They must practice telling themselves "I can XYZ..." just like they practice anything else. So how do we as coaches provide the environment for them to do that?

Earlier this year I started doing something new. At the end of the lesson I've been asking students "Please summarize the lesson using a few sentences that start with the words I can." I did this at the end of a first lesson with an adult student who replied "Oooh, you're good!" He then summarized the lesson with "I can" statements, including things like "I can identify the parts of the uniform and put

them on. I can describe the strip and the rules of the sport, I can come on guard, I can advance and retreat...etc.” This not only helped the student to recall the lesson, but it also helped forge a positive connection between the student and the new material. In a small way too, by doing this, the student made step toward identifying himself as a fencer. I have since been asking students to summarize most lessons with “I can.” Young children might say “I can hit you when you stop moving backward.” Older and more experienced students should be encouraged to use proper fencing terms and include as many details as appropriate for their skill level. “I can do counter-time.” is eventually replaced with “I can determine when to use counter-time.” and eventually “I can set up counter-time by...”

I try to remember to ask for an I Can summary with newer students, when introducing new material (both technical and tactical) to experienced students, or whenever a student makes some sort of breakthrough in their lesson. It is my hope that these students will have a stronger than usual sense of confidence and resilience under stress in competition later in their fencing careers. I have also introduced this concept to the CITs who attended my most recent NCDP Coaching Clinic.

Finally, the USFCA Coach Developer training course includes information about how to write course objectives and lesson goals. Lesson goals such as “The student will learn to execute a disengage attack using the fingers to control the blade.” are directly related to the “I Can” summary of the student. If the lesson goals are clearly written and the lesson is well taught, then the student’s summary of the lesson should accurately reflect the lesson goals. Coaches can use the student’s summaries to help reinforce the lesson in the mind of the student and also to learn how effective they were in planning and teaching the lesson.

* “Language and Goals Used in the First Lesson or Class” Summer edition of The Swordmaster 2024