

Practitioner Research

In this regular feature or 'space' in the newsletter we invite teachers, academics and postgraduate students alike to get involved in research into their own practice and to share their experiences, reflections and views on research they have done in their own classrooms. The following piece comes from Katherine Levy, a Research SIG member, who was inspired by Yasmin Dar's report on exploratory practice (ELT Research Issue 26) to submit her own piece. She conducted the research she reports on here in her own classroom as part of her Masters Degree in Applied Linguistics at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia.

Verbal Praise in the Classroom: An Exploratory Research Study

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Introduction

My own teacher education has been seasoned with rhetoric regarding the importance of praise in the classroom. During teaching practicum, I consistently received feedback that praised me for my positive encouragement and reinforcement. Indeed, much research has demonstrated that praise is an important element of a successful classroom. Harmer (2007) stated that praise is an essential tool of assessment in the language classroom and that positive praise is a sign of positive assessment for students. Positive praise has been defined as reinforcement of good behaviours and contributions (ibid) while still remaining general in nature. Another definition includes the concept of a 'positive evaluation' of one's actions, work or behaviours (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). In contrast, negative interactions have been described as 'criticism' including behaviour correction or punishment (Burnett, 1999). Positive praise leads students to perceive a more positive student-teacher relationship while the contrary is true for negative interactions (Burnett, 2002). However, Scrivener has recently questioned what he describes as 'empty praise' or 'overpraising' and has suggested that continual praise, as opposed to feedback, actually hinders the learning process (Scrivener, 2012).

At this point, it is necessary to make a brief distinction between praise and feedback. Praise is positive language that is a response to student behaviour in general, usually expressing admiration or approval

(Burnett, 2002). In contrast, feedback is corrective in nature and more explicitly related to students' ability to understand (Ellis, 2008). Scrivener (2012) posits that feedback is more desirable and effective than praise. The focus of this exploratory study will be praise as opposed to feedback in the classroom.

It was Scrivener's (ibid.) suggestion that made me question my own use of praise and its perceived effectiveness. I suspected that I was over-praising, leading to a diminished value of my praise and a lack of effectiveness for my students. My students seemed to be responding less to my verbal praise and it didn't seem to have the same effect on them as it used to. This was in spite of an increased energy and enthusiasm in my teaching during recent months.

I was inspired by the recently expanded body of research regarding exploratory research in the classroom (Dar, 2012) and decided to conduct my own exploratory research in my own classroom. This research was markedly different from the research I had conducted during my Master's degree so far, and I found exploratory research to be challenging yet extremely useful for my own classroom practice.

Puzzle Area: Why don't my students appear to respond to verbal praise in the classroom? It seems to have very little impact on their self-confidence and ability.

Hypothesis

I suspected that the reason for my students' lack of response was the amount of praising that I did in the classroom. I also suspected that I was unaware of exactly how often I actually praised, and that my praise utterances, or positive praise words, might be far more in number than I thought.

Before conducting my research, I self-administered a questionnaire in order to understand how I perceived my teaching practice. The questionnaire contained five short, simple, close-ended questions, to ensure that the data collection was clear and directly related to my puzzle area (Bourque, 2004). The questionnaire revealed that I believed the following about my praise:

- 1) I utter praise words approximately 5-10 times in a 50minute lesson.
- 2) 'Good', 'brilliant', 'yep', 'yes', 'okay', and 'excellent' were the words I utter most often.
- 3) I believe 'Brilliant', 'excellent' and 'good' are the words my students respond to the most positively.

Context

The class in which I investigated this puzzle was an IELTS examination preparation class at a private, English language school in Wimbledon, UK. The class was composed of eight students (3 males and 5

females) aged between 18-44 years. The nationalities represented were Brazilian, Japanese, Spanish, German, Chinese, Polish and Iranian. Their English language level ranged from 5.5-7 IELTS equivalent. All the students were current UK residents in some form of English-speaking paid employment.

Method

I voice recorded a 50-minute lesson using the voice recorder application on an HTC Incredible smart phone. My students gave their permission for the lesson to be recorded (they were told care would be taken to anonymise their contributions) and were made aware that nothing else would be different regarding the lesson. The lesson was transcribed with student responses being recorded as SR and all praise words were highlighted in the transcript then totals for each word were calculated.

Results

1. Quantity of Praise Utterance

During the 50-minute time period, 87 praise utterances were recorded. At 1.74 praise words per minute, this result was 8.7 times more than the preconception I had voiced in my responses to the pre-recording questionnaire (see Table 1).

Table 1.

| | Predicted | Actual |
|----------------------------------|-------------|----------|
| Praise utterances per 50 minutes | 5-10 | 87 |
| Praise utterances per minute | 0.1-0.2/min | 1.74/min |

Table 2.

| Word | Utterances |
|--------------|------------|
| good | 32 |
| very good | 13 |
| yep/yes/yeah | 13 |
| well done | 8 |
| perfect | 5 |
| exactly | 3 |
| fine | 3 |
| great | 2 |
| excellent | 2 |
| correct | 2 |
| nice work | 1 |
| cool | 1 |
| mhmmmm | 1 |
| uhuh | 1 |

2. Praise Word Choice

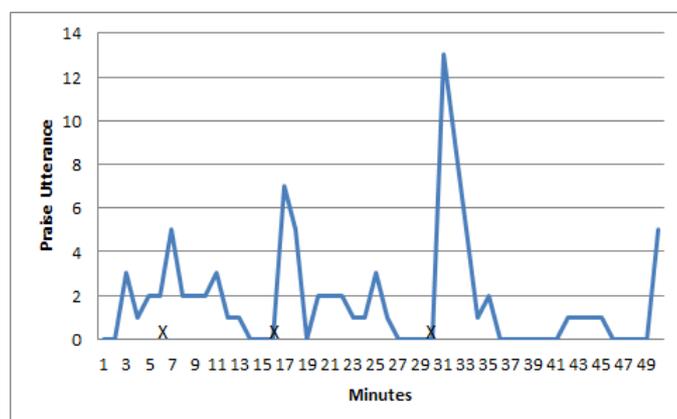
While I had perceived that 'good' was a word I used often in my praise, I was unaware of how often I said this

word in a lesson. In fact, I said the word 32 times in a 50 minute lesson, more than once every two minutes. Also, while my pre-recording questionnaire stated that I thought I said 'brilliant' and 'okay', I actually never used those words in the lesson. Instead, I used 'good' and 'very good' the majority of the time, with 'yes/yeah/yep' and 'well done' used 13 and 8 times respectively (see Table 2).

3. Dispersal of Praise

The praise was not consistently spread throughout the time, and there were clear clusters of praise directly following or during task feedback from students. The 'highs' in Table 3 correspond to such points. During these parts of the lesson, the students were giving their answers to the questions they had just completed. The praise during this task feedback is very much higher than anywhere else in the lesson.

Table 3.



Conclusion

My original analysis of my own assumptions showed that I was unaware of how often I actually praise my students. In fact, I praise my students over ten times more than I originally thought, and this was consistent throughout the lesson. The choice of praise words was also markedly different from what I had originally perceived and it was interesting to note that my use of the word 'good' or the variation 'very good' were much more frequent than any other word. There was also a frequent use of the words 'yes, yep or yeah', especially during student task feedback, which was not predicted in my pre-recording survey.

The dispersal of praise is also significant, as there was a marked increase in praise during student task feedback. In one case, after several minutes of no praise, thirteen praise words were uttered within the space of one minute. The words were also clustered together, as in this example from the transcript:

T: 'Yes. Okay, great. Yep, fine. Next?

S: My clothes machine (sic: washing machine) has been fixed by the man.

T: 'Great (student name)! You are getting there. Great work.'

It is clear that Scrivener's description of 'overpraising' could be applied here. He speaks of constant praise 'washing over' students and never really sticking or having the effect that the teacher intended. The clustered nature of my praise shows that my words are not praising a student response directly, with clear positive feedback, but rather simply uttering as many praise words as possible in a short space of time.

While I am clearly praising answers from students, as the clustering shows, the amount of words could be creating a lack of clarity for my students. Part of the reason behind this could be my desire to create a positive environment for my students, and allow them to have a 'safe' place to express their answers. However, students may value explicit feedback relating directly to a given response (Ellis, 2008) and it is possible that this 'general' praise lacks the specificity that is valued by students.

In creating this exploratory research study, I aimed to discover why my students did not respond to my praise as readily and enthusiastically as I would like. While my assumption was correct in that I do praise my students much more than anticipated, my study did not show whether this amount of praise had a negative effect on the students. In conducting this study, I gathered some very valuable data relating to my classroom practice and much of what I discovered does shed some light on the nature of my teaching methods. However, I cannot link this classroom practice to my student's response to praise based only on the data from this study.

To establish whether my use of general praise has led to my students' behavioural response (i.e. apparently becoming less responsive to praise), I would need to do more research, specifically relating to my choice of praise words. I suspect that my students do not respond to the word 'good' due to its overuse and it would be interesting to establish whether this is true. I would also like to ascertain which words my students respond most positively to, as this would help me to further develop my teaching practice and establish the explicit feedback that my students probably need.

This exploratory research was incredibly valuable and helpful to my teaching practice and I would encourage other teachers to research their own teaching puzzles to ensure that we are teaching to the best of our knowledge and ability.

References

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