*The Effect of Praising and Mutual Trust on Students' Learning*

Yasmine Mostafa, University of Fukui, Japan

**Abstract**

Research has proven that praising is always considered an effective strategic way to motivate students in the classroom, raise their self-esteem, and promote their positive behavior (Floress et al., 2017; Allday et al., 2012). The literature defines two types of praise: general praise (GP) which is a general statement of approval, and behavior-specific praise (BSP) which describes a specific characteristic or behavior of a child (Floress et al., 2017). Burnett and Mandel (2010) reported that Australian children want to be praised for their achievements and behaviors. This research investigates two cases. In the first case, the researcher studies how positive praise promotes Japanese students' self-learning and active engagement in a sixth-graders English class, whereas Japanese students are known to be shy and tend not to engage in English classes for fear of making mistakes. In the second case, the researcher shows how positive praise and constructional feedback can alter the aggressive behavioral attitude of a sixth-grader Egyptian child in the classroom into active engagement and a sense of responsibility. The research adopted a case study approach based on classroom observation and post-class interviews with the teacher for the first case and practical engagement with the student in the second case. The study suggested that the constant encouragement and praise during the class and the mutual trust between the teacher and the students that are derived by the safe learning atmosphere created by the teacher are the driving forces behind the students' positive behavior and active engagement in both cases.


Keywords: General Praise; Behavior-Specific Praise, Constructional Feedback, Self-Learning, Responsibility

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

**Introduction**

Research has proven that praising is always considered an effective strategic way to motivate students in the classroom, raise their self-esteem, and promote their positive behavior. When students are praised by their teacher, they tend to engage and participate actively in the classroom, think positively, and build mutual trust with their teacher. However, when students are scolded in front of their peers and are afraid of the teacher, they tend to retreat from the class and their performance is widely affected. They show negative behavior and this attitude is reflected in their relationship with their teacher and their peers.

In Japanese schools, most of the Japanese students do not engage actively and willingly in the English class. They always show no interest in the subject and when they are asked, they barely answer. This has been a major issue for English subject teachers over the years. The teachers know that students' fear of making mistakes in front of the others or being scolded or laughed at are the main reasons behind this negative behavior.

On the other hand, one of my students showed aggressive behavior towards his peers and was always a trouble-maker. He had very low self-esteem and this had affected his performance remarkably. My major issue was to find a way to deal with him to gain his trust in order to improve his poor behavior.

This research aims to emphasize the importance of positive praising and to highlight its impact on students' performance in the classroom, and to prove that praising and constructional feedback can alter students' negative and aggressive behavior into an act of active engagement and nurture their sense of responsibility.

**Methodology**

This research adopted a case study approach. The researcher investigated two case studies from different countries. The first case is for grade six Japanese students' English class in T Japanese national school in Japan. The investigation was done by class observation and post-class interview with the Japanese teacher (JT) and the Assistant Language Teacher (ALT).
The second case is for an Egyptian student M in N international school in Saudi Arabia. The study was based on the researcher's practical engagement with the student for a whole academic year.

**Literature Review**

Floress et al. (2017) and Allday et al. (2012) define two types of praise: general praise (GP) which is a general statement of approval, and behavior-specific praise (BSP) which describes a specific characteristic or behavior of a child. For decades, researchers have been studying the relation between positive praise and students' outcome (Becker et al., 1967; Dufrene et al., 2014; Reinke et al., 2008; Sutherland et al., 2000, as cited in Floress et al., 2017). Epstein et al. (2008) indicated that when students are praised for demonstrating good behavior in school, they are more likely to work better and experience social and behavioral success (as cited in Floress et al., 2017). Floress et al. (2017) consider praise as reinforcement of the behavior. Burnett and Mandel (2010) reported that Australian children want to be praised for their achievements and behaviors. On the other hand, not all students want to be praised loudly or in front of their peers; since they may find this uncomfortable or even punishing. Additionally, students who reported that their classroom was a positive environment reported

a positive relationship with their teacher (Burnett, 2002, as cited in Burnett and Mandel, 2010). Ikeda et al. (2014) say that it is important to monitor the effect of verbal praise (Ikeda calls it verbal reward) on students' motivation and actions and whether this praise will reinforce their behavior or not. Instead, it is suggested to specify a specific action or performance and praise this action or performance accordingly.

Oona McGee (2020) reports that Japanese students are taught English in Japanese "Katakana pronunciation"[1]. When it comes to communication in class, no one wants to speak differently from the others. Therefore, students do not try to improve their pronunciation and speaking skills in order not to look different from the others, or not to be laughed at or bullied during and after the class. Another main reason is their fear of making mistakes in front of the others and their "shy" personalities. Japanese education system promotes group mentality and emphasizes the importance of moving with the group. Thus, no one wants to speak out and look different from the others. However, this concept hinders individual improvement and the opportunity to learn (Tsunekawa, 2019, updated in 2020).

**Study**

**The First Case: Grade Six Japanese Students**

As mentioned above, Japanese students are known to be shy and tend not to engage in English classes for fear of making mistakes in front of each other. For years, Japanese teachers have struggled to find a proper methodology that may help students involve in the class. This research studies how positive praise can create a safe learning atmosphere for students and promote their self-learning and active engagement in the English class. As part of my job in the university, I visit schools and observe classes and provide support for teachers, when needed, for constant development of the teacher's professionalism. The aim is to collaborate with and support the teachers to nurture self-learners who can act autonomously and promote their passion for learning and exploring. Last year, I observed the sixth-graders English class in T school along with other university staff members and other teachers from the same school. In this class, there was a JT and an ALT. The system of ALT in Japan started in 1987 to develop and promote mutual understanding and for the internationalization between Japan and foreign countries[2]. Moreover, the presence of the ALT in the classroom provides an opportunity for students to learn real English from native speakers and to improve their communication skills.

Right from the beginning, the students showed a different attitude than usual. They greeted the guests warmly and welcomed us with smiley faces. In a normal class, students would start murmuring and they would not show any interest. The class started with teachers and students greeting each other to create a good atmosphere for learning. The ALT then explained the task and collaborated with the JT to provide an example of the activity for the students. The task was to introduce some attractive places in Japan utilizing the phrases they had learned in previous classes. As a result of the spread of the Coronavirus, students were not able to travel and explore new places. Instead, the teachers decided to make it up for the students by letting them look for attractive places in Japan and introduce them to each other

---

[1] Katakana Pronunciation refers to the pronunciation of English words as they would be written in Katakana, which is one of the Japanese alphabets used for pronouncing and writing foreign words. For example, "Book" will be pronounced as "Bukku", "Hello" will be "Haro".

[2] Most of the ALTs in Japan come and work through the JET programme. For more details on the JET programme, please visit this website http://jetprogramme.org/ja/history/.

to make the learning more fun and engaging for the students. The teacher wrote on the board some of the previously learned phrases and adjectives that can help the students with their activity, for example, it's amazing, it's wonderful, it's exciting…etc. The students started practicing in pairs. They moved actively from one pair to another and were widely engaged in the activity.

The next activity developed to a broader spectrum of introducing famous food and places in other countries. The students were asked to prepare for this activity in advance since it requires some time for searching. The two teachers again provided an example for the students. This time the teachers, intentionally, practiced a weak example in front of the students to promote their communication skills. Then, the students were asked to identify the mistakes in the teachers' communication and explain how they should be improved by suggesting alternatives. This method nurtures courage in the students and creates a safe and secure learning environment. In one way, it enables the students to distinguish the mistakes and point them out without shouting or scolding, and in another way, it promotes students' communication and positive engagement without the fear of making mistakes. Moreover, the students were also asked to praise the good parts in the example and provide feedback on it. When the teachers provided an example with mistakes, they showed the students that it is acceptable to make mistakes without being scolded or laughed at. However, at the same time, it is crucial to learn from those mistakes and accept comments and positive feedback from each other to improve one's skills.

The students were then asked to decide on one goal they want to achieve or improve during their next practice, for example, maintaining eye contact, speaking with a loud voice, being interactive with their partner…etc. The students started the activity. They practiced in pairs again, each one presenting his/her country to the other. After finishing the presentation, they asked their partners about what to improve in their performance. They provided feedback to each other and praised the good skills that each one could attain. They actively made good use of the advice and improved their performance with their next partners. The activity was even extended to the guests as well, which is something very rare. The students approached the guests *willingly*, including myself (it is something very rare for Japanese students to engage with foreigners they meet for the first time), and presented their countries. I asked one student a question on her presentation. Although she could not find the relevant word in English, she did not struggle or step back. She said what she could in English and supported her answer with some Japanese words. She was very interactive and smiling all the time. She knew it was acceptable to do her best and not be perfect; therefore, she did not fear combining English and Japanese to achieve her goal. I told her the word that she did not know in English and she used it and was very happy that she could communicate with me. This behavior is very uncommon among Japanese students and it obviously reflects the ease the students feel and the high self-esteem that is raised in them through praise and positive feedback.

The mutual feedback and praise that they provided to each other indicate that it is a practice they have seen and learned from their teacher, that had been nurtured in them over time. The students looked very motivated throughout the class and ended the class with a smile. They were eager to learn from each other and did not hesitate to ask for help from each other when they needed it. The ease they felt and the safe atmosphere that was created by the teachers generated a self-learning environment and allowed the students to thrive.

During the post-class interview with the teachers, the ALT spoke highly of the Japanese teacher and her behavior with the students. When he was asked about the reason behind the students' positive behavior and active engagement, he said that the reason was the teacher. He spoke of the big difference between the performance and attitude of the students in this class and other classes of the same school and other schools. He said that her tool was praising and creating a relaxed and safe learning environment.

**The Second Case: An Egyptian Student M in N International School in Saudi Arabia**

In the second case, the researcher proves that positive praise and constructional feedback can alter the aggressive behavior of a student into active engagement in the classroom and raise his self-esteem. The target student is a sixth-grader Egyptian boy M who was transferred from a national school in Saudi Arabia to the international school I used to work at. It was my first year in that school in Saudi Arabia. I was still less experienced especially in dealing with boys of this age. The class consisted of 32 boys, all with diverse countries and backgrounds. It was always said that the boys, especially of this age, have to be dealt with strictly and shouted at when misbehaved. However, this method did not work out especially with M. He constantly misbehaved in my class and would cause trouble to the other students. Sometimes I could not hide my frustration and I would shout at him strongly in the class. His peers would mock him for being shouted at which lowered his self-esteem and pride and made him feel insecure. He could not trust anyone. This was reflected in his academic performance, as well. He never followed instructions. He would deviate from the theme provided for the essay and write whatever he liked. Therefore, his marks were always very low. I began to empathize with him and I did not like when students mocked him. Therefore, I decided to try a different method.

Strictness is needed, but it is not the solution to all cases. Therefore, I worked on building trust with M and between him and his peers. I realized that securing my students mentally and emotionally was the key to their minds. In my class, I decided on different roles, for example, class monitor, date keeper, board eraser…etc. for the students to motivate them and nurture their sense of responsibility. These roles were changed weekly. I gave M the role of the monitor of the class, that is to monitor the class till I come and report any misbehavior from any student to me. He was never given this role before by any other teacher; since it is the most important. When M was assigned this role, he showed a pure happy smile on his face which was never there before. It was challenging yet very motivating for him. His role started the next day. The next day, I came into the class and found many names written on the board of those who misbehaved before I came. These students were sure I would not believe M as he was not trustworthy; therefore, they did not show any respect to him as a monitor and did not follow his instructions. When I came in, he reported to me what had happened and I trusted his words. Those who misbehaved were warned as agreed. This act was the first step towards building mutual trust with M. The next day when I came into the classroom, there were no names on the board. All the students behaved well and respected M as the monitor. He reported no mischief and I believed him. Since then, he started to feel responsible and proud of himself.

The next step was to follow his academic performance. He had the potential in writing essays; however, he only needed the proper guidance. I decided to guide him in private not in public to provide him with a chance to consolidate and rethink what he needs. I changed my way of feedback to him. I started to focus on the positive points in his work and behavior (behavior-specific praise), and share them with the others to help him realize his strengths

and work on improving them. After a short time, he started to show remarkable improvement not only academically, but also behaviorally. He stopped making trouble and started making friends and building trust with them. He started raising his hand in the class more often to answer. Even when mistaken, he did not give up.

One day he wrote a great essay. I made him read it in front of the others as I always did with those who wrote good essays. Since it was his first time, he was nervous, but he managed to read it till the end. After he finished, his classmates praised him and they pointed out the strong points in his essay. It was clear that he gained self-confidence and his classmates realized his change. He smiled and returned to his seat with his body stretched up. He could finally feel himself part of this community and not an outsider who was always left behind.

**Conclusion**

This study proves that the constant encouragement and praise during the class and the mutual trust between the teacher and the students that is derived by the safe learning atmosphere created by the teacher are the driving forces behind the students' positive behavior and active engagement. The teacher plays a crucial role in supporting the students and securing them mentally and the students are directly affected by the behavior of the teacher in the classroom. In this study, I intentionally went beyond borders and introduced two cases from different countries to define the relationship between the teacher and the students, and to prove that all the students want to feel safe and secure regardless of their nationality.

**Reference**

Allday, R. A., Hinkson-Lee, K., Hudson, T., Neilsen-Gatti, S., Kleinke, A., & Russel, C. S. (2012). Training General Educators to Increase Behavior-specific Praise: Effect on Students with EBD. *Behavioral Disorders, 37*(2), 87-98.

Burnett, P. C., & Mandel, V. (2010). Praise and Feedback in the Primary Classroom: Teachers' and Students' Perspectives. *Australian Journal of Educational & Developmental Psychology, 10*, 145-154.

Floress, M. T., Beschta, S. L., Meyer, K. L., & Reinke, W. M. (2017). Praise Research Trends and Future Directions: Characteristics and Teacher Training. *Behavioral Disorders, 43*(1), 227-243.

Ikeda, K., Koizumi, Y., Iijima, N., Kawasaki, Y., & Nishiura, K. (2014). The Effect of Encouragement through Praise: Relationship between Praise and Collaborative Activity on Spontaneous Motivation. *Research Reports of Shokei Gakuin College, 67*, 73-82.

McGee, O. (2020, September 26). *The Reason Why Japanese Students Don't Pronounce English Properly*. Japan Today. https://japantoday.com/category/features/opinions/the-reason-why-japanese-students-don%E2%80%99t-pronounce-english-properly

The Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET Programme). (n.d.). http://jetprogramme.org/ja/history/

Tsunekawa, K. (2019, August 29. Updated in 2020, October 27). *6 Reasons Why Japanese Cannot Speak English According to a Japanese Local*. Tsunagu Japan. https://www.tsunagujapan.com/6-real-reasons-why-japanese-cannot-speak-english/

**Contact email:** ymostafa@u-fukui.ac.jp