INVESTIGATING TEACHER PRAISE AND DIRECT FEEDBACK AS MOTIVATIONAL TOOLS IN THE EDC CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT
This project examines what kinds of instructor feedback (praise-based feedback, or direct feedback) are more effective at getting students to use targeted function phrases in communicative activities, and whether different kinds of feedback work differently with different kinds of students. The study examined several classes of mid-level students. The classes were subjectively ranked by the instructor from “relatively unmotivated”, to “very high motivation”. After a 10-minute discussion, each student was verbally praised by the instructor on their use of one function, and given direct feedback on their use of another function. Performance in the second discussion was then compared to performance in the first, and the results averaged for each class. Direct feedback was found to be more effective than praise, with the additional finding that praise may actually be detrimental to function usage when offered after the first discussion.

INTRODUCTION
It is a widespread belief in educational psychology that teacher praise is an important source of reinforcement for successful student performance and an essential part of teaching (Brophy, 1981). Praise has been shown to increase performance when made contingent to positive behaviour (Lipe & Jung, 1971; O’Leary and O’leary, 1977, cited in Brophy). Praise is viewed as providing encouragement, self-esteem, and good teacher-student relationships. Common sense would also seem to dictate that praise for tasks which were done well should be balanced with direct feedback: constructive criticism or suggestions on how to improve future performance of tasks which were not done well.

Much research, however, has shown that praise does not always correlate strongly with improved student outcomes (Brophy, 1981). Indeed, some research shows that praise for ability may actually be detrimental to student motivation (Mueller and Dweck, 1998). Mueller and Dweck’s study did show that praise for effort may enhance student motivation and performance. Inherent ability may be perceived as a stable quantity, whereas effort is changeable; when students are confronted with failure, if they have previously been praised for ability, they may conclude that they lack the necessary ability to continue. On the other hand, if they have been praised for effort in the past, they may attribute their failures to a temporary lapse in effort, which can be remedied.

In any case, there does not seem to be a great deal of conclusive research into praise and feedback, but providing feedback is a central role of the EDC teacher. As the Rikkyo University English Discussion Course is an attempt to have students use language they already know, to have genuine communication with other students, EDC instructors do little actual “teaching” (in the traditional sense of providing new information) but rather, listen closely to and evaluate students’ discussions and then provide feedback. It is therefore very important to try and understand what kinds of feedback are most effective at improving student performance.
Unlike in many other university language courses, student performance in EDC can easily be quantified by examining the number of uses of target phrases used in a discussion. While this is not the only aspect of student evaluation in EDC, function use provides a straightforward, quantifiable framework for analysis.

The present study seeks to answer the following research questions:
1a. Does teacher praise (feedback for a task done well) improve the subsequent performance of that task?
1b. Does direct feedback (highlighting a task done poorly) improve the subsequent performance of that task?
2. Which is more effective for improving student performance in the short-term: praise or direct feedback?
3. Is there any evidence that praise-based or direct feedback has an effect beyond the short-term?

METHOD

Participants
Five classes, for a total of 37 participants (18 male, 19 female) were analyzed. They were first-year students enrolled in English Discussion, a compulsory course for all freshmen. All five classes were “B-level”, or mid-level in ability. (Approximately 70% of incoming students are placed in the B-level based on a standardized paper test.) Classes were characterized early on in the semester as being comparable in ability. Having started the project, however, it was later noted that there was considerable discrepancy in the motivation of each class. ESL/EFL instructors will be familiar with the situation where two classes of similar ability will (for various reasons possibly including time of day or “chemistry” between students) perform at very different levels in terms of their readiness to begin activities, the amount of language produced, the amount of negotiation of meaning between students, etc. Of the five classes, one could be said to be “relatively unmotivated”, two were of “average” motivation, one was “highly motivated” and one was “very highly motivated”. This ranking was subjective, based on the instructor’s perception of their behavior throughout the semester, including amount of speech produced.

Procedure
The basic procedure for each class was to perform a warm-up to develop fluency, a 5-10 minute presentation of the target language or function, practice of the new function, a pre-Discussion preparation activity, and then a ten-minute discussion, (Discussion 1) done in groups of 3 or 4, depending on class size. During this ten-minute discussion, the number of usages of function phrases for each student was recorded on a check sheet. (Note that, for a function phrase to be scored, it must be used correctly in context; it is not sufficient to merely make an out-of-context utterance.) Based on each student’s performance in Discussion 1, one item (a particular function) was selected for praise. A second function, which had been relatively under-performed, was selected for direct feedback. Although the instructor did not have a script, per se, an attempt was made to be consistent when giving feedback verbally, following a basic pattern similar to the following example:

“[Name], great job using Reporting Information. You talked about some news you saw on television. Excellent! Please continue using this function. I didn’t hear you use Being Indirect much, so try and use that function more in the next discussion.”
Each student received one item for praise and one item for direct feedback. Following this feedback, students then did a preparation activity, and were placed in new groups for the second discussion (16 minutes). During Discussion 2, the teacher continued to record function usage for all students.

In order to make the feedback genuine and contingent on student performance, functions selected for praise were those which had been used relatively frequently; functions selected for direct feedback were those which the student had used little or not at all.

The measurement was carried out 4 times, in Weeks 7, 8, 11, and 12. Not all participating classes provided usable data in each measurement week. This was for various reasons, including significant student absences, or insufficient class time to allow for a full 16-minute Discussion 2.

**Measures**

As stated, following Discussion 1, one item was selected for each student as the “Praise Item” (P) and one item as the “Direct Feedback Item” (D). The usage of each function in Discussion 1 was recorded as P1 and D1, respectively. In Discussion 2, the number of times each item was used was recorded as P2 and D2. The increase in use of each item was found by simply subtracting:

- Increase in Praise Item = ΔP = (P2 – P1)
- Increase in Direct FB Item = ΔD = (D2 – D1)

From the above, it is possible to have ΔP or ΔD negative; this indicates a decrease in usage and occurs if a student used an item fewer times in Discussion 2 than they did in Discussion 1. The results were averaged for all students in a particular class.

**RESULTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Praise ΔP</th>
<th>Direct ΔD</th>
<th>Direct – Praise ΔD - ΔP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (Low Motivation)</td>
<td>Wk 7</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wk 11</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wk 12</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ave:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (Ave. Motivation)</td>
<td>Wk 11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (Ave. Motivation)</td>
<td>Wk 11</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wk 12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ave:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.645</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (High Motivation)</td>
<td>Wk 7</td>
<td>-0.8</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>1.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wk 8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wk 11</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ave:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (Very High Motivation)</td>
<td>Wk 7</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1*
As seen in Table 1, it was not uncommon for students’ function usage for Praise Items to be zero or to actually drop (as indicated by the negative values for $\Delta P$). This means that after being praised for their usage of a particular function, students often used this function less in the subsequent discussion. In contrast, the average values for Direct Feedback Items ($\Delta D$) were always positive, indicating that, on average, their usage increased.

It can also be noted that there seems to be a trend of increasingly high values for ($\Delta D - \Delta P$) as the class motivation increases. This is shown in graphical form in Chart 1:

![Average Difference of Direct and Praise Feedback](figure.png)

Figure 1

The effects of Praise and Direct Feedback were also examined over a separation of one week. To do so, the function usage of the Praised Items for a given week’s Discussion 1 were subtracted from the instances of the same function in Discussion 1 of the following week. For example, if comparing Week 7 and Week 8:

Increase in Praise Item $= \Delta P = (P1_{Week8} - P1_{Week7})$

Increase in Direct Feedback Item $= \Delta D = (D1_{Week8} - D1_{Week7})$

The results of this measurement are summarized in the following table:
In examining these results, again it is found that it is not uncommon for the performance of Praise Items to actually decrease in the next class (as indicated by the negative values). In contrast, the Direct Feedback Items are all positive values. Although the class with the highest subjective motivation value also has the highest difference between ($\Delta D - \Delta P$) values, there does not seem to be an obvious trend or correlation with motivation.

**DISCUSSION**

It is clear that, on average, Direct Feedback was more effective in getting students to increase their usage of Function Phrases following the first discussion, in both the short-term (in Discussion 2) and in the longer term (in the next week’s Discussion 1). Indeed, Praise often had the unexpected result of not changing student performance, or even making it worse in some cases!

In addition, it is noted that there seems to be a trend towards a greater difference in effectiveness between Direct Feedback, and Praise Feedback, as the motivation of classes increases. This is to say, the more motivated a class is, the more effective Direct Feedback seems to be, compared with Praise. It is not particularly surprising that Direct Feedback (of the form “You need to use more Function X…””) should be an effective way of motivating students to use more Function Phrases. Students are aware that their performance is being measured by the teacher, and this results in them receiving a particular point score for each class.

What is somewhat surprising is that Praise Feedback is less effective, and may actually be detrimental to their performance. This result may be explained (at least in part) by the timing of this feedback. Offered after the first discussion, telling a student “Great job using Function Y” followed by Direct Feedback, may be sending a message akin to “Okay, you have used Function Y enough, you now have full points and don’t need to use it anymore. What you need to do now is…”

If this is, in fact, the message that students are receiving, then it stands to reason that highly motivated classes would take this message more seriously than do unmotivated classes. Classes which an instructor perceives as “highly motivated” may just be those classes which

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Weeks</th>
<th>Praise $\Delta P$</th>
<th>Direct $\Delta D$</th>
<th>Direct-Praise $\Delta D - \Delta P$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (Low Motivation)</td>
<td>Weeks 7-8</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weeks 11-12</td>
<td>-0.429</td>
<td>1.714</td>
<td>2.143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ave:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>1.7715</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Ave Motivation</td>
<td>Weeks 11-12</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Ave Motivation</td>
<td>Weeks 11-12</td>
<td>0.857</td>
<td>1</td>
<td><strong>0.143</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 High Motivation</td>
<td>Weeks 7-8</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>1.833</td>
<td><strong>2.833</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2*
follow instructions closely, and which actively do what an instructor directs them to do. Note that the most highly motivated class (Class 5) also showed the single greatest drop in Praise Item performance ($\Delta P = -2$) of all groups; this seems to indicate that they strongly interpreted the Praise Feedback as a signal that they could “ease up” on their use of that Function, and focus instead on their individual weak points. Students who are highly motivated may be students who have good study skills and high awareness of their own performance in class. Students who are labeled as having low motivation by a teacher may be students who do not listen to the teacher closely, who do not value instructor feedback highly, who are not aware of their own performance in class, or who are not particularly interested in ways to improve their scores.

It is interesting to note that these effects were consistent in their longer-term effects, as well. Items which were praised in a previous week were, on average, used less in the subsequent week. When a student is given Direct Feedback and directed to use a Function more, this effect carries over to the next week. There was no clear trend linking student motivation with the strength of feedback reinforcement, but further data could potentially shed light on this.

I would like to point out that I do not believe these results indicate that Praise-type Feedback is a bad idea. I continue to believe that praise is an essential part of instructor feedback, but these results may indicate that the timing of feedback is essential. Praising students on their use of a particular Function may be misinterpreted as meaning that they have used that Function enough, and no longer need to focus on it. I suggest EDC instructors use Direct Individual Feedback before activities, and then use Praise at the end of a class to highlight what that class did well, to emphasize good points, and to congratulate students who worked hard. I have found Praise especially effective with individual students who are underperformers.

To quote Brophy (1981):

…Students who are praised under circumstances in which they know everyone gets praised are not likely to attribute the praise to anything special about themselves (the praise is due to the teacher’s proclivity for praising certain types of behavior). On the other hand, praise that is unexpected is more likely to lead students to conclude that they have done something genuinely praiseworthy. (p23)

Used appropriately, a balance of Praise and Direct feedback, I believe, will always be the best way to help classes improve their performance.

CONCLUSION
The results of this study indicate that direct feedback may be more effective than praise in improving student performance in key areas. Praise feedback may be interpreted as meaning that students have reached a satisfactory level in a given skill, and no further effort is required. The timing of feedback probably plays an important role in how it is interpreted, as well as the nature of the feedback (e.g., is it delivered to the entire class, or just outstanding individuals?)

Suggestions for further research: This study focused on a combined approach with a balance of praise and direct feedback given to each group. It would be interesting to examine the case where one class is given only praise, and another class is given only direct feedback, and comparing these results. As suggested, it would also be valuable to examine longer-term effects of feedback, to determine how long the effects last and how well students are able to integrate targeted skills in their long-term development.
REFERENCES