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Controversy over the Value of Praise in Language Education

Abstract: The text is an article of reflection on the value of praise in language education. Praise has been a controversial issue across the whole post-war history of language teaching, psychology and the educational sciences. The following questions arise: Does praise contribute to the learning outcomes? Can approval be counterproductive? Can praise be unnecessarily frequent? What is its optimal format? What is its relation to feedback? The text will attempt to offer possible answers to these questions in order to formulate recommendations for pre- and in-service teacher education.

Keywords: praise, feedback, language teaching, language learning, teacher education

Introduction

Praise, one of the basic classroom strategies in the history of education, defined as positive evaluation, based on subjective standards, directed at another person's actions or outcomes (Brummelman, Crocker and Bushman), has had multiple enthusiasts in academic circles and is embraced by followers of diverse teaching methods and approaches.

In language teaching, in the times of the domination of the Audiolingual Method, based on behavioural principles, praise was seen as reinforcement of learners' reactions to stimuli provided by teachers either directly or via recordings from school language labs. Reinforcement thus presented was supposed to function as a guarantee of forging durable stimulus-reaction links and, in consequence, effective habit formation. Verbal or nonverbal praise was recommended as an indispensable instrument in the language teacher's toolkit (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson).

The Cognitive Method, founded on the cognitive psychology principles, recommended praise as a motivator which would encourage learners to set forth hypotheses about the functioning of the target language and test them during classroom interaction. Reasons, however, differed from those which had been governing the former audiolingual teaching: praise was expected to signal approval of learners' successes in effective meaning making, or, at least, their risks undertaken in communication attempts. Additionally, it provided encouragement for the future (Richards and Rodgers).

In the Communicative Approach, strongly related to the psychology of individual differences, praise is viewed as a useful educational instrument helping to shape the course of language appropriation through experiential and interpretive methods, in which error is considered unavoidable and feedback indispensable. The present approach stresses the need for a considerable increase in the amount of praise during language lessons, viewing approval as a way to strengthen learner autonomy, motivation and engagement, i.e. factors perceived as crucial by the proponents of the sociocultural theory underlying the recommended procedures (Lantolf and Thorne).

Three of the most popular classroom management models, named after their authors—Canter, Glasser and Kounin (Charles)—are based on the principle of identifying desired behaviours and reinforcing them through public praise, while educators who believed in this line of action (Gable et al.) encouraged work on lists of phrases which could be used to briefly and convincingly communicate approval in the classroom context (Harmin). They, however, needed to justify their belief in the value of praise, a stance by no means popular among teachers and parents.

1. Arguments supporting praise in the teaching process

After the 21st-century breakthrough in teacher education connected with the affiliation of teacher-training colleges with universities and the promotion of the praise-friendly Communicative Approach (Komorowska, "Origins"; Komorowska and Krajka), praise in the language classroom has been strongly recommended due to the variety of its functions in education and the belief in positive results springing from its affective and informational value, as well as its role in support of a key educational goal: a learner's positive self-evaluation.

Approval of a learner's behaviour or achievement in one field of activity contributes to overall educational aims, as positive external assessment of a specific aspect has been found to strengthen an individual's global self-concept (Byrne), while a more positive self-concept, in turn, results in a more positive specific self-evaluation. In consequence, this bi-directional influence reduces inhibitions and lowers the level of language anxiety, eliminating negative emotions which form what has, for the last four decades, been referred to as the *affective filter* (Krashen;

Truscott). Eventually, approval raises the level of willingness to communicate, indispensable for a language learner's success (Piechurska-Kuciel).

Researchers confirm that the increase in the intensity of positive affect, strengthened by praise, correlates with increased openness, thus creating a friendly classroom atmosphere, which contributes to learners' engagement and promotes interaction vital for the effective development of productive language skills (Gabryś-Barker).

Supporters of praise in education stress that approval functions as a powerful motivating factor encouraging students to enhance their efforts and actively participate in classroom activities not only immediately after hearing a positive remark, but also in a more distant future. Praise has also been demonstrated to increase learners' perseverance on task (Dweck, "The Perils" and *Mindset*). Additionally, educators point to the fact that, unlike punishment or person praise, process praise rarely causes negative side-effects, as feared by its opponents (Haimovitz and Corpus; Skipper and Douglas).

Praise has an important place not only in research results, but also in the European language policy, in which the *deficit model* of education based on the type and frequency of errors, i.e. on what the learner cannot do, has been replaced by the *benefit model*, redirecting attention to what the learner can do, i.e. to positive outcomes presented in terms of skills and competences. The change of approach is reflected in documents by the Council of Europe, such as the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)*, the *European Language Portfolio (ELP)*, as well as the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL)* (Newby et al.).

Although in the history of education criticism of praise tended to dominate, in communicative language teaching, contrarily, special significance is attached not only to the presence of praise, but also to its amount. Literature on teacher education published after the communicative turn of the 1970s suggests that the frequency of positive remarks should be increased in order for learners to concentrate on desired behaviour rather than on errors they have committed (Brophy; Jenkins, Floress and Reinke).

In language education, this opinion was voiced for the first time in the interpretation of data collected in the international research conducted in eighteen countries: ten for English (Lewis and Massad) and eight for French (Carroll). The project aimed to assess the teaching and learning of English and French, as well as to identify correlates of teachers' and students' success. The researcher team examined the classroom behaviours of teachers whose language groups achieved above average scores on test batteries and whose learners demonstrated liking and respect for their instructors in anonymous attitude-oriented questionnaires. The teachers thus identified as successful were then observed in classroom situations during lessons taught to learners of different age groups and language levels. In these sessions, praise was noted twice as often as during lessons taught by other teachers (Carroll; Lewis and Massad).

Research in the educational sciences, social psychology and educational sociology also demonstrates the power of praise in boosting motivation (Benson-Goldberg and Erickson), improving interpersonal relations and strengthening group cohesion (Edwards and Watts; Evertson and Weinstein). Yet, praise has not always been considered beneficial by every educator.

In the evaluation of a learner's progress, as well as in day-to-day classroom management, critical remarks are hard to avoid. A question therefore arises of proportions between both types of evaluative comments, their optimal frequency, recommended format and possible side-effects.

2. Arguments against praise in the teaching process

The value of praise in education has been subject to controversy for decades (Ginott; Hattie and Timperley; Kohn; Strain and Joseph). The issue was additionally complicated by international comparisons, as a result of which praise came to be perceived as culture-specific; differences have been pointed out between Western Europe, where praise is considered beneficial, and Eastern Europe, where praise is not so eagerly dispensed. A much more restrained attitude has been identified in Asian communities, especially in China and Japan (Aronson, Wilson and Akert).

Even within the same culture, the attitude towards praise is by no means uniform. Although classroom management models proposed by Canter, Glasser and Kounin (see Section 1 above) recommended praise as a didactic technique effective in shaping desired classroom behaviour and supporting learning strategies considered conducive to high educational attainment, another extremely popular model, first introduced by Ginott, recommended refraining from praise-oriented teaching. According to Ginott and his followers, praise is effective mostly for students with an external locus of control, i.e. those whose self-concept is influenced by the opinions of others. Praise may, therefore, result in mistaken educational aims and is likely to prevent the development of autonomy, independence or creativity (Kamins and Dweck). Additionally, it tends to elicit envy on the part of students to whom praise has not been granted, a negative effect which social comparisons often yield (Corpus, Ogle and Love-Geiger).

A frontal attack on praise can also be found in recent publications. Benson-Goldberg and Erickson state that "[e]ducation that leads to long-term, positive outcomes encourages, motivates, and inflates the self-esteem and challenge-seeking behaviours of students. Unfortunately, praise can erode each of these. Praise can lead students to believe that they are inherently bad or only good when they succeed" (Benson-Goldberg and Erickson), while Leis maintains that, in the university context, praising some students leads to creating a fixed mindset in others, who then do not expect their results to improve (Leis).

Less radically-minded educators pointed out that a degree of caution in using praise, often too generously endowed on learners in the classroom, is certainly

useful, yet it should not preclude any well-directed approval of a particularly impressive piece of a learner's work or their exemplary behaviour (Charles).

Opinions have also been voiced, mainly—though not only—in American education, that praise has become too frequent and thus may lose its value, especially when applied to insignificant aspects of learning outcomes or behaviour (Tomasello). Even more worrying, praise can prove harmful when it contributes to the shaping of a learner's inadequate self-image. Moreover, learners who get accustomed to permanent praise, have been found to become dependent on it and get easily demotivated if it is not immediately dealt. For these reasons, trainees in pre-service education are recommended to use words of encouragement, rather than so-called *direct praises* (Nakamura). The reservations presented above, however, warn against the abundance and inflation of praise rather than undermine its value or suggest rejecting it on the grounds of its being a useless pedagogical instrument. Misgivings are justified when the type of behaviour addressed by a positive comment is not worth praising or when the praise is inflated and students with a realistic judgment are likely to deem it unjustified by the quality of a learner's work and thus unfair or straightforwardly manipulative (Brummelman et al.).

Other remarks critical of praise, voiced over the last decades (Cangelosi; Nakamura; Komorowska, "Formative"), have referred to stereotyping learners by labelling them "able" or "intelligent," but also to any teacher's behaviour characterized by overpraising or misaddressing praise. Labels are conflict-breeding, person-oriented messages, which do not link approval or disapproval to what learners have done, but to who they are. Stereotyping by labels also causes serious intra- and interpersonal problems: Dweck's research ("Caution" and "The Perils") demonstrated that learners praised for their ability and/or intelligence tend to use self-handicapping strategies and avoid undertaking difficult tasks so as not to lose the much-appreciated label of a gifted student and, in consequence, slow down their progress or show regress in skills. In contrast, learners praised for effort tend to respond to challenges, attempt to solve more difficult tasks and usually manage to further develop their skills, thus demonstrating a growth mindset rather than an undesired fixed one (Dweck, *Mindset*; Leis).

Additionally, intelligence-oriented labels unintentionally encourage students to demonstrate contempt for those less well genetically endowed, but also—what is particularly pedagogically undesirable—incline students to feel ashamed of their own efforts, as hard work comes to be viewed as dishonourable for a bright learner and considered a symptom of lower intellectual potential (Garstka).

3. Directions of praise: Behaviours qualifying for approval

If praise is to occur frequently in the language classroom, and if unjustified praise considered manipulative by the learner should be eliminated, selecting appropriate targets for the teacher's approval becomes a particularly difficult task. To

offer a positive comment appropriately, a specific type of a learner's behaviour or a learning outcome needs to be demonstrated. Teachers, however, have been found to offer mainly generic "well done!" praises, thus depriving students of a chance to understand which outcome or instance of what behaviour elicited the comment (Floress et al., "General").

It is often pointed out that not every student can be considered worthy of praise, even if positive comments are planned to address relatively small-scale successes. Teachers usually explain their difficulty in identifying an aspect worth praising by insufficient learners' effort. Two other reasons can, however, shed light on the phenomenon, one related to the way learners view sources of their outcomes, and the other to teachers' expectations of learners' educational attainment.

The first factor belongs to the sphere of attribution defined as ways of ascribing causes to personal successes or failures. A classical model presented more than six decades ago (Heider) and later tested by other researchers (Weiner) points to four factors typically perceived by individuals as responsible for their achievement or the lack of it. These are: ability, effort, luck and task difficulty. Of these, only task difficulty is relatively easy to measure. Individuals tend to view their success as a result of internal factors, such as ability or effort, and failures as caused by bad luck or the wrong-doing others. Research also demonstrates that these results are culture-sensitive: members of Western communities more frequently ascribe causes to internal factors, while Asian communities lean towards external attributions (Wosińska).

Belief in one's own intelligence and ability prompts learners to take advantage of inborn capacities, but does not incline them to accept responsibility for their actions. Attributing results to good or bad luck gives students the benefit of not feeling accountable for the outcomes, and as such cannot be considered a desired pedagogical effect. The teachers' role is to direct learners' attention towards factors encouraging individual regulation, thus shaping their internal, rather than external, locus of control. Approval is, therefore, better targeted when addressed at the student's effort; it is then likely to boost their self-evaluation and positively influence their locus of control, as the higher the self-evaluation level, the stronger the tendency of an individual to demonstrate internal locus of control (Franken).

The second factor influencing the frequency of praise in the classroom is the teacher's expectation of the learner. Low expectations correlate with a lower level of requirements, a situation which in itself does not necessarily reduce chances of achieving results worthy of praise. The problem lies elsewhere; students in the lower expectations group are rarely nominated by the teacher and, if asked a question, receive a shorter wait time, which causes questions to be answered by other students or the teacher himself/herself (Marzano). It is this specific type of teacher-student interaction, rather than the student's potential, that results in the scarcity of praise. Teachers are, therefore, recommended to avoid communicating negative expectations to learners, and instead, offer more nonverbal approval signals, allow more wait time, and encourage students to engage more actively in student-student interaction.

Accordingly, approval can and should be directed towards even small aspects of a learner's work, such as volunteering, offering an interesting idea, using appropriate vocabulary, or correct spelling. Refraining from undesired behaviour, so common in classroom situations, should also be praised; praise then has the added value of surprise—learners expect to receive their teacher's attention mainly in reaction to error or bad behaviour, i.e. to what is usually disapproved. Praising effort also helps to strengthen students' goal orientation and their conscious contribution to achieve desired outcomes (Försterling).

4. The format of praise—how to praise effectively?

Recommendations concerning the effectiveness of particular approval formats are based on the present psychological knowledge of principles governing the functioning of human memory. According to research on memory traces, negative elements are remembered longer and more vividly than the positive ones (Mickley Steinmetz and Kensinger). The phenomenon is most probably caused by evolutionary outcomes; overlooking positive stimuli might have deprived the individual of instant gratification, but disregarding negative stimuli might have meant ignoring danger at the cost of one's life or the imminent extinction of the whole species.

It is interesting to note, however, that the research results discussed above have not been replicated in studies on the functioning of memory in older adults (Kensinger and Schacter). Negative information did not seem to be more durably engrained in their brains; rather, positive information has been found to leave deeper traces in third-age subjects, probably due to age-related changes in emotional self-regulation or an older learner's need to protect their sense of projecting a favourable social image (Borkowska; Mather; Williams et al.).

Because this mechanism, prioritising critical remarks over the favourable ones, is still present in the functioning of human memory, it must be taken into consideration by educators who strive to focus learners' attention on approval and reinforcement. Particularly in teaching children and adolescents, positive remarks should outweigh negative ones for praise to be remembered better. In the international research on foreign language learning discussed in Section 1, the number of critical remarks successful teachers offered was similar to the average made by less successful instructors, but the number of positive ones was double. Effective teachers were intuitively aware of the fact that criticism leaves a deeper memory trace than praise and, therefore increased the amount of praise (Lewis and Massad; Carroll).

Since that time, teacher education programmes have stressed the fact that frequency of praise thus communicated should be significantly higher than that of critical remarks. Yet, appropriate praising behaviour does not easily lend itself to training; teacher trainers maintain that in-service teacher development programmes are not particularly effective in developing skills to offer well-measured, specific

and precisely addressed praise (Simonsen et al.), a phenomenon caused by en-grained instructional habits. That is why it seems worthwhile to develop appropriate praising behaviour during pre-service teacher education and encourage trainees not only to increase the amount of praise, but also to communicate approval in an independent unit, thus separating positive and negative signals. It is particularly important for student teachers to avoid complex messages that contain a praise followed by a critical comment ("well done, BUT…"), as such messages may result in a deeper memory trace of the latter—a recommendation especially important in teaching gifted learners (Delisle).

Knowledge of efficient praise formats is based not only on the psychology of human memory, but also on principles governing interpersonal communication. The rule of separating positive and negative comments, although important, cannot compensate for praise which is formulated in a deprecating way and conveys the teacher's surprise that such a low achiever managed to attain an astonishingly good effect or for a positive comment which contains a public reminder that the recent, above average learning outcome had never been noted for the student before. Messages of this kind sometimes become insulting *pseudo-praises*, seemingly favourable, yet rich in passive-aggressive nonverbal information. According to researchers studying conversation signals, when there is a mismatch between verbal and non-verbal cues, the statement is heard as untrue, due to the power of non-verbal communication, a phenomenon reflected e.g. in the perception of ironic statements (Jacob et al.).

In short, praise will be perceived as approval only when offered in a "THIS-message" which targets a learner's product or behaviour—as it then carries practical information about what has been done well—or when it is communicated through an "I-message" showing a teacher's personal appreciation (Wegener). In contrast, due to the labelling character of a "YOU-message," a misconstrued praise leads to the formation of stereotypes and may result in a learner's inadequate self-esteem, later counterproductive both to their overall development and to healthy interpersonal relations in a language group (Hattie and Timperley). Yet, teachers often believe that any positive labelling praise format can help to shape a student's more positive self-concept and, therefore, will prove helpful in dealing with shy learners who suffer from language anxiety and, therefore, demonstrate low levels of willingness to communicate. Research, however, shows that only well-justified and well-directed praise can fulfil this function, while inflated praising has a powerful adverse effect, especially on learners with low self-esteem (Brummelman et al.), and also girls and younger students (Corpus and Lepper).

In the last decade of the 20th century, educators (Cangelosi; Smith and Laslet) undertook the task of formulating the basic principles of communicating approval, which would be both educationally effective and constructed in a manner consistent with the rules governing human memory. An algorithm of effective verbal approval rooted in research conducted by Bull and Solity requires a correct positives

message to contain three components: 1. a clear statement of praise, 2. a detailed reference to the aspect worth praising and 3. a declaration of belief in a learner's similar attainment in the future. More recent publications reformulated and enriched the algorithm, recommending that an educationally-effective message of approval should fulfil three important functions: a) equip the learner with a precise indication of what the praise refers to; b) enable the learner to feel the power of the message which would ensure the replication of desirable behaviour; and c) clearly indicate to other students in the class the kind of outcomes expected by the teacher and/or ways of achieving a desired result (Floress et al., "Praise").

It is, however, obvious that the need for an increased amount of approval in the language classroom and the length of teaching sessions leave little time for extended verbal praises presented in the format discussed above. That is why a considerable number of non-verbal instances of simplified praising procedures should also be present in the classroom. A smile or a head nod are powerful signals communicating approval. They also provide a bonus in the form of better classroom management and more learner engagement. The reason for this additional advantage is the fact that a learner who typically directs his or her attention to teachers only when they correct errors or nominate students to answer questions need to be much more attentive to notice and react to nonverbal cues (Conroy, Sutherland and Snyder; Floress et al., "Praise", Gable et al.).

A word of caution is needed here. Praise in its extended format is an integral element of feedback crucial for formative evaluation (Laveault and Allal; Linsin), but should not be considered identical with the notion of feedback. While praise can take the form of a nonverbal or a brief verbal message, classical classroom feedback calls for much more extensive communication containing four components. Unlike praise, it refers not only to 1. the aspect of a learner's work which was worth the teacher's approval, but also calls for 2. a more detailed justification of the positive comment, enriched by 3. an explanation of what needs to be corrected, completed or extended and, finally, followed by 4. recommendations on possible ways of introducing improvements, which would support the future development of a student's skill (Garstka; Komorowska, "Formative").

The teacher, however, needs to be prepared for classroom situations in which even a correct praise format may result in a learner's discomfort, due to hostile attitudes on the part of other students in the group. Unless the reason lies in a generally competitive classroom atmosphere or unnecessary social comparisons (see Section 2), an unpleasant reaction to another student's being singled out for praise can be interpreted as a signal of underpraising, a phenomenon first noticed by Brophy more than four decades ago and confirmed in more recent research (Corpus, Ogle and Love-Geiger). Underpraising results in approval being perceived as unusual or extraordinary, and, as such, makes every positive comment carefully watched for its fairness. Increasing the amount of praise through identifying smaller aspects of assignments or students' behaviour to be pointed out functions as an effective remedy.

5. Conclusions

What follows from the above is that criticism of praise proves, in fact, to be criticism of errors in the teachers' praising strategies, the main mistakes being:

— overpraising: too high frequency of praise,

— unfair praising: praising learners who do not deserve it,

— misaddressing praise: praising insignificant aspects of process or product,

— insincere praising: praising only to boost a learner's self-esteem,

— using pseudo-praises: praises containing internally contradictory messages,

— dealing out person-oriented praises: praising by means of "YOU-messages",

— using stereotype-forming praises: praising through labels of ability or intelligence.

Psychological, pedagogical and linguistic research demonstrates that if teachers want students to perceive positive and critical remarks in the language classroom as balanced, instances of approval should significantly outnumber those of disapproval. Moreover, in the teaching of children and adolescents, the former should be clearly separated from the latter, or else only the negative remarks will leave durable memory traces, adversely influencing learners' willingness to communicate. Combining the two is only recommended for complex feedback-giving, similar to the composition of a classical SWOT analysis with its four components of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats—in education understood as possible difficulties that may be encountered in the future (Onion and Aranguren). Praise should also be constructive, which is only possible if it is process- or product-directed, immediately following desired behaviour.

Individual praise, the role of which is to reinforce a learner's desirable behaviour, should target aspects precisely distinguished and clearly pointed out. This calls for a stable structure of praise, the first component of which should contain a statement of approval, the second precise verbalisation of what is being praised, and the third an encouragement for the future. The model structure, thus described, does not eliminate nonverbal reinforcement of appropriate learners' reactions, as it has an important role in securing a friendly atmosphere in the classroom. Silent positive cues focus learners' attention on the course of events and the teacher's reaction to them, promote frequent eye-contact and, as a result, help to ensure student engagement, encourage interaction and support efficient classroom management (Everett et al.).

Group appraisal is useful, even if the teacher has no guarantee of learners' equal participation in pair or group work. Firstly, it is the teacher who is responsible for creating conditions which will guarantee harmonious collaboration in a group, with effort shared fairly among group members. Secondly, praising the whole group delegates part of the responsibility for the future process of project preparation to participants themselves. Additionally, positive remarks help to build cohesion and increase willingness to communicate in a group, factors which are especially important in the Communicative Approach.

Pre- and in-service teacher education faces the task of communicating to teachers the essential role of praise format and make them aware of the fact that well justified praise is never excessive in amount, if only its target has been precisely indicated.

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