

Evolving Roles of Teachers' Praise in EFL Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This study replicates Yamauchi's preliminary study on supportive teacher talk (2015) in order to investigate a natural shift in teachers' praise deployment in communicative language classrooms at a private Japanese university. In Spring 2015, video recordings were collected twice over a semester (Lesson 4 and Lesson 12 from a 14-lesson term) to observe a shift in praise deployment. A follow-up interview was conducted in Fall 2015. The findings indicate that the two variables, observation periods and curricular goals, are related to the teachers' decisions and actions on praise deployment. Generally, teachers tend to give more managerial types of praise towards a group in the early semester and gradually shift its deployment to more instructional types of praise towards individual students. The results also imply possible influence of other variables such as individual teaching style on teacher talk within a unified language course.

INTRODUCTION

Instructor feedback plays an important role particularly in student-centered communicative language classrooms (Lesley, 2015). In a micro-size, compulsory English Discussion Class (EDC) program for all freshmen students at a private university in Japan, therefore, instructors are trained to help foster students' abilities to participate in English discussions. For instance, the EDC Instructor Handbook (2015) lists some suggestions for monitoring and giving feedback in order to facilitate learners' desirable outcomes, including giving specific feedback, ending with a remark that gives a sense of success, and giving more focused actionable feedback. This implies that the EDC instructors could be following a general pattern in deploying certain types of feedback to meet their curricular goals, while retaining or refining their own personal beliefs in conducting such small-size communicative language classrooms. With that in mind, this study describes nature of supportive feedback, namely praise, in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms in Japan.

Corrective feedback (CF), "responses to learner utterances containing an error" (Ellis, 2006, p. 28, as cited in Lyster, Saito & Sato, p. 1), has been one of the most researched topics in SLA research (Lyster & Saito, 2010). In contrast to such popularity of CF, however, there seems to be little classroom research on supportive feedback that pertains to learners' accomplishments, not errors (Sugita & Takeuchi, 2006).

Praise is often employed for two major reasons in language classrooms: motivating learners for a better attitude toward learning and building a rapport among peers as well as between students and the teacher (Sugita & Takeuchi, 2006). Although such positive effects of praise seem to be highly recognized in the field of language education, some researchers warn that not all encouragements are effective (Broderick, 2012; Sugita & Takeuchi, 2006), and recommend that language teachers should know when (timing) and how (purpose) of giving praise. This implies that analyzing the functional aspects of commonly deployed praise could help language teachers see a general pattern or timing of praise deployment for development in pedagogy.

Studies on Praise

Sugita and Takeuchi (2006) examined the use of verbal encouragement in all levels of English EFL classroom settings in Japan through an analysis of classroom video-observations. In contrast to their study which was set in relatively conventional large-size classrooms, Yamauchi's study

(2015) was conducted in the communicative language classroom at the university level. In order to investigate not only types of praise but also potential roles of praise in communicative language classrooms, Sugita and Takeuchi's (2006) six categories of encouragements were adapted for the study with the two extra factors of teacher behaviors (managerial/social function and instructional/academic function) by Beaman and Wheldall (2000) as described in Table 1.

Table 1. Classification of praise used in Yamauchi's study (2015)

<i>Category</i>	<i>Original Definition</i>	<i>Additional Definition</i>
1 (managerial)	Remarks for building self-confidence, inviting students' positive participation, and reducing anxiety. (e.g. Don't worry!)	Remarks for encouraging students to complete their task. (e.g. "Uh-huh." While a student was talking.)
2 (managerial)	Remarks for showing understanding of a students' answer and showing agreement with a student's opinion. (e.g. I agree with you.)	
3 (managerial)	Remarks for helping students in difficult conditions. (e.g. Whisper answers to students who are getting nervous.)	
4 (instructional)	Simple praise with no concrete reference to students' performance. (e.g. Very good.)	
5 (instructional)	Detailed praise with concrete reference to students' performance. (e.g. Your pronunciation / idea is very good.)	
6 (instructional)	Remarks for acknowledging a right answer. (e.g. Exactly.)	Remarks for acknowledging an expected or helpful behavior. (e.g. "Thank you!" when a student handed in a quiz.)

Sugita and Takeuchi's study (2006) indicated that most university teachers used "Remarks for acknowledging a right answer most frequently" (Category 6) and the encouragements were likely to be directed at individuals than at the whole class (p. 63), while Yamauchi (2015) found that "Detailed praise with concrete reference to students' performance" (Category 5) was used most by teachers in communicative language classrooms, and praise was directed more towards a whole class than individual students (p. 315).

Also, the findings showed that the higher the proficiency level was, the more praise was directed toward a whole class. Similarly, the later the observation period was, the less praise was provided by the teachers. Nevertheless, it also indicated that three major factors such as the differing proficiency level in the data, the difference in observation period, and the difference in teaching style should be better controlled for more accurate results. Thus, this present study is modified from Yamauchi's (2015) study in the same teaching context within the same proficiency level in order to explore the effects of the timing of observation period over a semester.

Beaman and Wheldall's (2000) study suggested that praise is used for two purposes (instructional and managerial) systematically so as to increase appropriate behaviors while decreasing inappropriate behaviors. Yamauchi's findings (2015) indicated that the teachers in communicative language classrooms tended to deploy praise for instructional purposes to strengthen students' appropriate academic behaviors rather than their social behaviors. Also, this tendency increased for the higher proficiency levels and the later observation period. This present study, therefore, will analyze how similarly or differently the instructors from the same proficiency level deploy certain types of praise over the course of a semester and see if the need for praise deployment will change within the same proficiency level and over a semester.

Through observing the teachers who taught the same proficiency level (lower intermediate), in the same observation periods over the course of a semester (the fourth and twelfth of fourteen lessons in a semester), this study investigates how praise is being implemented over the course of the semester. The following questions will be explored in this study: In communicative EFL classrooms:

- What types of praise are used the most?
- What types of praise are used the least?
- Which function is more common: praise for the academic behaviors (i.e. instructional purpose) or praise for social behaviors (i.e. managerial purpose)?
- Does the amount of praise increase or decrease over the course of a semester (e.g. between Lesson 4 and Lesson 12 in the spring semester)?
- Do the qualities of praise (e.g. types and functions) change over the course of a semester?

METHOD

In an effort to investigate the natural progression of EFL language teachers' use of praise in the communicative language classroom over the course of a semester, two instructors, one native male instructor and one non-native female instructor who had both been teaching in the same course for four years, were chosen for the study. Their English discussion classes (EDC) composed of eight first-year university students were selected for analysis. Four recordings of the two teachers' 90-minute class observation videos were collected each from Lesson 4 and Lesson 12 of the 14-lesson course in Spring 2015. These particular lessons were selected in order to better control for possible variables found in the previous study. Classes with the same proficiency level (lower intermediate with a TOEIC score between 280 to 479) and the same type of the lesson (both Lesson 4 and 12 were reviews for the upcoming tests) (Yamauchi, 2015). Each video recording was transcribed by the researcher, and teachers' praise in the classroom was identified and categorized in charts into type and function according to Sugita and Takeuchi (2006)'s six categories for verbal encouragements and Beaman and Wheldall's (2000) two functions of praise. Afterwards, the frequency data were converted into proportions and the selected proportions from particular types of praise were analyzed. In addition, to supplement the data, the researcher conducted a follow-up interview with instructor B in the 2015 Fall semester (see Appendix B for leading questions). The interview was recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Yamauchi's preliminary study (2015), the Literature Review above, and a transcription from a follow-up interview with Instructor B were used for the interpretation of the data.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

This partially replicated study identified and described what types of praise were commonly deployed by instructors over the course of the semester in a small-size communicative EFL

classroom in the university settings in Japan. Through controlling two variables (the proficiency levels and the observation periods), frequency of praise deployment, functions of praise, progression of praise deployment over time were investigated. The transcribed data from four observation videos were categorized and presented into two sections: the averaged data and the raw data. With the averaged data from two different instructors, the first section (Tables 2 and 3) was created in order to analyze the general trend of supportive feedback.

Table 2. Average numbers and proportions of praise in two items in Lesson 4

<i>Function</i>	<i>Managerial</i>			<i>Instructional</i>			
Category	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
For all	10	2	8	8.5	13	13	54.5
	12.42%	2.48%	9.94%	10.56%	16.15%	16.15%	67.70%
Total by Function	24.84%			42.86%			
For individual	3	0	7	0.5	9	6.5	26
	3.73%	0.00%	8.70%	0.62%	11.18%	8.07%	32.30%
Total by Function	12.42%			19.88%			
Total	13	2	15	9	22	19.5	80.5
	16.15%	2.48%	18.63%	11.18%	27.33%	24.22%	
Total by Function	37.27%			62.73%			

Note. Figures after the third decimal fraction were omitted.

Table 3. Average numbers and proportions of praise in two items in Lesson 12

<i>Function</i>	<i>Managerial</i>			<i>Instructional</i>			
Category	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
For all	5	1	4	9	12	3.5	34.5
	8.40%	1.68%	6.72%	15.13%	20.17%	5.88%	57.98%
Total by Function	16.81%			41.18%			
For individual	2	1	4	1.5	7.5	9	25
	3.36%	1.68%	6.72%	2.52%	12.61%	15.13%	42.02%
Total by Function	11.76%			30.25%			
Total	7	2	8	10.5	19.5	12.5	59.5
	11.76%	3.36%	13.45%	17.65%	32.77%	21.01%	
Total by Function	28.57%			71.43%			

Note. Figures after the third decimal fraction were omitted.

Over eight weeks from Lesson 4 (Table 2) to Lesson 12 (Table 3), the averaged data from two different instructors show both quantity and quality of praise used in the classroom. In both lessons over the semester, Category 5 (Detailed praise with concrete reference to students' performance) was deployed most, while Category 2 (Remarks for showing understanding of a students' answer and showing agreement with a student's opinion) was used least by both instructors. The findings provide evidence, which supports earlier findings (Sugita & Takeuchi, 2006; Yamauchi, 2015) that

university-level EFL teachers in Japan prefer giving praise with a specific reference, while giving praise as sympathy is least preferred. One logical reason for this may lie in the language instructors' training as the most deployed praise (Category 5) was also suggested in the EDC Instructor Handbook (2015). This implies the positive association between common types of praise and the curricular design.

In addition, both the instructional use of praise and praise towards individual students increased by 8.7% and 9.72% respectively, while the total number of praise decreased by 21 points. The shift towards more instructional use of praise over the semester can be explained in terms of the natural progress in classroom management. Namely, teachers can naturally give more complements on academic behaviors later in the semester because the classroom management has already been set in the earlier semester, which also echoes earlier findings (Yamauchi, 2015). The following excerpt from the interview about the perception towards types of praise implies possible decision-making factors, implementation of curricular goals and response to group dynamics.

"It's very hard to say. But...perhaps, the majority is academic, maybe 80-85 percent, academic, because we have limited time and we want students to achieve the course goals, but that really also depends on the dynamic of the group, if I got a group where there are particular issues that I see ...with them bonding, ...in terms of their confidence, as individual or confidence to interact, then, there might be a slightly more equal weighting between the purpose of my feedback or in my praise. (09:52-11:00)"

On the other hand, this study's preferred audience for praise, more towards individual students, is contrary to Yamauchi's recent findings (2015), yet it supports other earlier findings (Broderick, 2010 and 2012; Sugita & Takeuchi, 2006). This contention may be explained from the following excerpts on principles and the change in giving feedback over the semester through understanding individual students.

"... The weighting [of praise] is probably more towards EDC ... but at the same time, I will also be praising individual student contributions to the class... But overall it will be weighted more strongly towards the aims of this particular course. (5:00-6:00)"

"...I think I do [change] because ... my relationship with the group develops. I know more about them as individuals... I have a better understanding of how they are going to react to my praise or criticism... a little more, maybe egalitarian maybe at the start. It's more me in position of the teacher at the front of the class, handing down praise, perhaps towards the end, I would like to think that it's more of advice given from someone at an equal level. (11:30-13:00)"

Furthermore, the decreasing total amount of praise over the semester proves an assumption made in the previous study that a teacher uses praise differently over the course of the semester due to the need to establish academic and social protocols in the classroom early in the semester (Yamauchi, 2015). However, the reason why the total amount of praise decreases over the semester is unknown. Thus, as described in the first excerpt above, it might be interesting to see how praise is deployed along with criticism in the future studies.

The following section summarized and interpreted comparisons of the raw data of each instructor's two lessons (See Appendix A: Tables 4, 5, 6 and 7) to explore possible implications in this study. Over eight weeks, one unique feature that instructor A showed was almost 50% dramatic decrease in the use of Category 3 (Remarks for helping students in difficult conditions.).

This result implies that, at an earlier stage, the instructor was more helpful for students in dealing with academic and social tasks in the classroom, but gradually, the help would have faded away. This finding supports Yamauchi's assumption (2015) and Instructor B's earlier comment that the status of the teacher in the classroom seems to change over a semester for better from *knower* to *advisor*. Particularly in CLT-based, small-size EFL classrooms, this recognition might help guide a language teacher to employ praise more effectively.

Another distinctive feature from instructor B was that the change in the most deployed praise; it changed from Category 6 (Remarks for acknowledging a right answer or conduct) to Category 5 (Detailed praise with concrete reference to students' performance). Also, there was a noticeable decrease in the total number of praise by 35 points. The shift in the most deployed praise and the dramatic drop in the use of praise imply some teaching strategies that instructor B intentionally deployed, which can be seen in the excerpts above and the following excerpt that talks about principles in giving praise. In other words, the shift from praise in Category 6 to praise in Category 5 corresponds to instructor B's principles. Also, the decrease in the amount of praise suggests that the relationship between the instructor and the students had improved by the end of the semester.

"I think time permitting... I would always aim to say what they've done a good job with, so there would be always an example of what I'm praising. I may well sometimes say, "good job" without any support. I think that would just be basic encouragement... (4:00-5:00)"

Limitations of the Study

Considering a wider range of contexts, (EFL or ESL and conventional classrooms or communicative classrooms), it is appropriate to note that the results from this study could also be attributed to other variables such as instructors' teaching style, teaching/academic backgrounds, gender, and native language. Since the sample size was small, larger studies would enrich understanding of the mechanisms of praise or supportive feedback.

CONCLUSION

Although it is difficult to generalize common trends in praise deployment in small-size communicative EFL classrooms from small samples, the current study reveals noticeable patterns on praise that corroborate previous studies. Firstly, university EFL teachers in Japan prefer giving more praise with a concrete example, while not deploying praise to sympathize with learners. Secondly, the use of instructional praise increases over a semester as both academic and social protocols is set towards the end of the semester. Finally, the increased use of praise towards individual students over the semester hints at a shift in the instructors' approach from collaboration-focus to individual-focus as well as a decrease in overall praise over the course of the semester.

Particularly in CLT-based, small-size EFL classrooms, this recognition of the developing roles of praise might help guide a language teacher to employ praise more effectively. In short, it is important for language teachers to notice how our teaching principles evolve over various factors such as curricular goals and the relationship with learners. Through analyzing sometimes routinized, habitual, or unconscious teacher decisions or behaviors such as giving praise, language teachers may be better equipped to improve their teaching and their students' learning.

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APPENDIX A

Table 4. Numbers and proportions of praise (Instructor A, Lesson 4)

Function	Managerial			Instructional			Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
For all	4	0	8	13	11	4	40
	5.71%	0.00%	11.43%	18.57%	15.71%	5.71%	57.14%
Total by Function	17.14%			40.00%			
For individual	5	0	9	0	10	6	30
	7.14%	0.00%	12.86%	0.00%	14.29%	8.57%	42.86%
Total by Function	20.00%			22.86%			
Total	9	0	17	13	21	10	70
	12.86%	0.00%	24.29%	18.57%	30.00%	14.29%	
Total by Function	37.14%			62.86%			

Note. Figures after the third decimal fraction were omitted.

Table 5. Numbers and proportions of praise (Instructor A, Lesson 12)

<i>Function</i>	<i>Managerial</i>			<i>Instructional</i>			
Category	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
For all	5	0	3	16	8	2	34
	7.46%	0.00%	4.48%	23.88%	11.94%	2.99%	50.75%
Total by Function	11.94%			38.81%			
For individual	3	2	5	0	11	12	33
	4.48%	2.99%	7.46%	0.00%	16.42%	17.91%	49.25%
Total by Function	14.93%			34.33%			
Total	8	2	8	16	19	14	67
	11.94%	2.99%	11.94%	23.88%	28.36%	20.90%	
Total by Function	26.87%			73.13%			

Note. Figures after the third decimal fraction were omitted.

Table 6. Numbers and proportions of praise (Instructor B, Lesson 4)

<i>Function</i>	<i>Managerial</i>			<i>Instructional</i>			
Category	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
For all	12	4	8	4	15	22	65
	13.79%	4.60%	9.20%	4.60%	17.24%	25.29%	74.71%
Total by Function	27.59%			47.13%			
For individual	1	0	5	1	8	7	22
	1.15%	0.00%	5.75%	1.15%	9.20%	8.05%	25.29%
Total by Function	6.90%			18.39%			
Total	13	4	13	5	23	29	87
	14.94%	4.60%	14.94%	5.75%	26.44%	33.33%	
Total by Function	34.48%			65.52%			

Note. Figures after the third decimal fraction were omitted.

Table 7. Numbers and proportions of praise (Instructor B, Lesson 12)

<i>Function</i>	<i>Managerial</i>			<i>Instructional</i>			
Category	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
For all	5	2	5	2	16	5	35
	9.62%	3.85%	9.62%	3.85%	30.77%	9.62%	67.31%
Total by Function	23.08%			44.23%			
For individual	1	0	3	3	4	6	17
	1.92%	0.00%	5.77%	5.77%	7.69%	11.54%	32.69%
Total by Function	7.69%			25.00%			
Total	6	2	8	5	20	11	52
	11.54%	3.85%	15.38%	9.62%	38.46%	21.15%	
Total by Function	30.77%			69.23%			

Note. Figures after the third decimal fraction were omitted.

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

1. Could you describe the roles of praise or encouragement (supportive feedback) especially in communicative EFL classrooms like EDC?
2. What types of supportive feedback do you think are effective or necessary in communicative EFL classrooms?
3. In your current teaching context, when (e.g. kinds of situations) do you usually give your supportive feedback? Why?
4. In your current teaching context, which do you think you use more supportive feedback to: your students' academic behaviors (i.e. instructional purpose) or social behaviors (i.e. management purpose)?
5. Do you think you change the way you give your supportive feedback over the course of a semester (e.g. between lesson 4 and lesson 12 in spring semester)? Why or why not?