

POSITIVE ORAL FEEDBACK IN EFL CLASSROOMS: EFL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICE AT SOME UPPER-SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THUA THIEN HUE

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Abstract: In EFL classrooms, teachers tend to adopt a variety of techniques to enhance students' motivation and hence their achievement. One of them is positive oral feedback. The aim of this paper is to examine the use of positive oral feedback in EFL classrooms by English teachers at some upper secondary schools in Thua Thien Hue Province. The instruments used for collecting the data include the questionnaire, interviews and class observations, and there were fifty EFL upper secondary school teachers who participated in the research. The findings showed that high school English teachers had positive perceptions towards positive oral feedback. However, there was a slight difference between perceptions and practice of giving positive oral feedback.

Keywords: Positive oral feedback, English teachers, perceptions, practice, high schools, students' motivation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers' feedback plays a crucial role in students' progress, since it is used to boost their engagement in classroom. Obviously, there is a variety of feedback types that teachers can apply in language classroom so as to encourage students' involvement and language performance and improvement. Positive oral feedback is one of many communication techniques that can be employed by language teachers who either correct learners' performance implicitly or explicitly or ask them to clarify what they say in different contexts of language practice.

In EFL environments like Vietnam, it is interesting to see how oral feedback, especially positive oral feedback, works in different learning contexts and through various classroom purposes so that the tool can be used in a more effective way by both language teachers and learners.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Feedback in EFL classrooms

In education, feedback is one aspect that is quite important to increase the students' motivation (DeNisi & Kluger, 2000). Specifically, feedback, in education, in a teacher-student learning environment can be defined as "information given to learners which they can use to revise their inter-language" (Ellis, 1999:702). This is somehow related

to the definition of feedback in general, in which they are both beneficial to the receivers/learners in terms of revision for the next time.

When focusing on oral feedback especially, a division can be made on the basis of a task type or activity. Oral feedback as a topic strongly relates to the area of feedback and the role of the teacher in the classroom. According to various researchers, oral feedback has proven to be an effective tool in SLA classrooms (Lyster et al., 2013). Oral feedback has been studied according to the situation it is used in (Harmer, 2001).

There are some types of teachers' oral feedback. They are evaluative feedback, corrective feedback, descriptive feedback, interactional feedback, and motivational feedback. Evaluative feedback regards the form of judgment on students' performance or work (Tunstall & Gipps, 1996). Tunstall & Gipps (1996) classified ways of evaluative feedback into rewarding, punishing, approving, and disapproving. Corrective feedback is a response given to a learner's error (Ellis, 2006). Lyster and Ranta (1997) classified corrective feedback into recast, explicit correction, elicitation, metalinguistic feedback, and repetition.

2.2. Positive oral feedback

Positive feedback is given by teachers to students to provide reinforcement in terms of learning. For example, when students do respond, the teachers give positive oral feedback to students as "good job, needs to be improved this part" or "excellent", "good", etc. (Ellis, 2009). She also stated that a good reinforcement for students is positive feedback, because then students can be motivated to learn more (DeNisi and Kluger, 2000). Furthermore, it provides reinforcement in terms of learning. In the same manner, offering praise or positive oral feedback can increase learners' satisfaction and lift their learning spirit. Brown (1994, p.58), for example, recommends that teachers use immediate verbal praise as a form of short-term reward to keep students confident in their ability. In conclusion, the technique of giving oral feedback proves its benefits in language classrooms, and is grounded on sound assumptions of ELT methodology by established authors in the field, and the practice of this technique has so far been studied in language classrooms in the world.

2.3. Related studies on the use of oral feedback in EFL classrooms

Marko (2007) conducted a study on the effectiveness of teacher oral feedback in an ESL/EFL classroom at the University of Oregon's American English Institute. In order to collect the data, three types of instruments were used: student and instructor questionnaires, observation instruments, pre and post-observation interview forms. There were 8 instructors and one level 5 reading/ writing/ grammar class of 15 students at American English Institute. Six of the instructors and 13 of the students returned completed questionnaires and became final participants of the study. Data collected from teachers about teacher oral feedback show that there is consistently a reasonable amount of positive feedback for every teacher who filled in the questionnaire. The finding showed that teachers' verbal feedback and praise had a significant positive

impact on the learners' motivation in learning and participation and hence their achievements.

Farah (2015) conducted a case study of students at one of junior high schools in Bandung, Indonesia: "Teachers' praises and students' engagement in EFL classrooms". The study analyzed the use of praise and its influence toward students' engagement. The population of this research included an English teacher of EFL classroom and 260 students of seventh grade in one public Junior High School in Bandung. Qualitative approach was employed in this study. The data of this study were obtained from classroom observation through video-recording. The result of this study showed that the way teacher gives praise to the students is in line with the theory of effective praise. The observed teacher in this study gave praise to the students in four steps: description of appropriate behavior rationale, request acknowledgment, and positive consequence. In addition, the result of the study also showed students' positive engagement after being praised by the teacher. There were five characteristics of students' engagement that appeared during classroom observation: positive body language, consistent focus, verbal participation, students' confidence, and fun and excitement. In conclusion, the use of praise would influence students' positive engagement if it was given properly.

Abbasi et al (2015) emphasized the importance of positive oral feedback by conducting a study aiming at exploring the effects of teachers' verbal feedback and praise on students' achievements. The participants of the study were all EFL learners of Navid English institute in Jahrom. A pre/post test was used as the research tool and two groups of female students participated in this study (N=30) under two conditions: no feedback, feedback and praise provided by the instructor. The findings showed that teachers' verbal feedback and praise had a significant positive impact on the learners' motivation and hence their achievements. As a result of giving feedback and praise to the students and their effects on motivation and achievements, it can be argued that the more motivated students are, the more and the better they will learn.

Ramon (2016) conducted a study at a university in Chile, which presents an analysis of the insights of 28 EFL teachers and their stated perceptions about oral corrective feedback. It appeared that most of the teachers were not fully aware of the frequency and the amount of feedback they tended to provide and when to do it, nor of the different types of correction they used. Even though all the teachers acknowledged the importance of feedback, they expressed concerns about interrupting students and provoking negative affective responses. Informing teachers of the results of corrective feedback research can encourage them to use a wider variety of techniques and possibly make their teaching more effective and at the same time improve students' oral proficiency. The findings of this study contributed to the comprehension of teachers' perceptions on students' feelings and attitudes in learning their foreign languages. However, there has still little research into using positive oral feedback in upper secondary schools and such aspects as reality of implementing positive oral feedback have not been focused on for the benefit of EFL better teaching and learning. This

research is hoped to bridge this gap of research by means of exploring EFL teachers' perceptions and actual practice of the technique.

3. THE STUDY

3.1. Purposes

The research aims at answering the following research questions:

1. What are the teachers' perceptions towards giving positive oral feedback in EFL classrooms?
2. What is the current practice of giving positive oral feedback in EFL classrooms by the teachers?

3.2. Participants and research site

Fifty English teachers at five different high schools in Thua Thien Hue participated in this study, who were between the ages of 24-58. There were 3 male teachers and 47 female ones. Their teaching experiences ranged from 2 to more than 20 years.

3.3. Research methods

Firstly, a survey questionnaire translated into Vietnamese was conducted. It consisted of two clusters with 35 items and it was rated to a five-point Likert scale (*1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: neutral, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree*). Then interviews were carried out with 8 English teachers, which consisted of eight open-ended questions in order to cross check the teachers' responses in the questionnaires and gain more information about teachers' perceptions and practice of giving positive oral feedback in EFL classrooms. Finally, class observations were conducted with eight different classes. There were four lessons in total to be observed, in which each skill was observed with two different teachers to gain an insight into the real practice of teachers in giving positive oral feedback.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Teachers' perceptions towards the use of positive oral feedback in EFL classrooms

4.1.1. Findings from questionnaire data

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics of perceptions of high school English language teachers towards the use of positive oral feedback in EFL classrooms*

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Perceptions of high school EFL teachers towards positive oral feedback in EFL classrooms.	50	3.89	4.79	4.39	.21771
1. The importance of positive oral feedback in EFL classrooms	50	3.88	5.00	4.44	.27798
2. Areas for positive oral feedback	50	3.43	4.71	4.28	.30611
3. When positive oral feedback can be given	50	3.50	5.00	4.49	.34241

The perceptions of EFL teachers towards positive oral feedback are presented and analyzed in Table 1.

Firstly, as can be drawn from the data collected in Table 1, positive oral feedback was supported highly by the teachers ($M=4.39$ for the whole cluster, and $M=4.44$ for the importance of positive oral feedback). According to the majority of teachers, the classroom environment depends chiefly on students' attitude towards learning and positive oral feedback and praise play a crucial role in teaching and motivating students in learning. Besides, it is found out that students are also interested in being praised and positively commented, which help them make progress if they know their strength or weaknesses that need to be corrected by their teachers. Furthermore, the majority of the participants also agree that learning a language requires a lot of self-confidence and it is teachers' encouragements that make them more confident.

Secondly, the data analyzed proves that the mean score of each item was very high in comparison with the third scale (3.0) among five-point Likert scale. Particularly, the result shows that the majority of the participants encourage their students by giving positive phrases with the highest frequency in oral skills and reading ones. Furthermore, the result indicates that positive oral feedback can also be used frequently by English teachers in teaching grammar and listening skills.

Finally, the result indicates that a great number of the participants agree that positive oral feedback can be used in different situations in classrooms, particularly after students' performances and sometimes when teachers return students' assignment.

4.1.2. Findings from interview data

All of the interviewees said that they use positive oral feedback in teaching activities to a certain extent. Particularly, they claimed that positive oral feedback helps their students to be more motivated to learn English. Moreover, they stated that their students' self-confidence is also gradually boosted thanks to being given positive oral feedback on their performances by English teachers.

"...they don't hesitate to present in front of the class because I won't criticize them if they give incorrect answers" (Teacher 5)

Furthermore, the majority of the participants shared that only when positive oral feedback is given properly will their students positively participate in the activities. Otherwise, it can have negative effects on learners' motivation if it is misused or overused.

"...positive oral feedback may be ineffective if it is given in the wrong way. For example, when students don't give any correct response." (Teacher 7)

More importantly, all of the teachers agree that there should be a combination of giving positive oral feedback and clarifying what part their students do well or not. This combination was showed to be effective and convincing thanks to the teachers' explanation and clarification. In terms of areas for giving oral feedback, most of the

teachers stated that they give more positive oral feedback mostly on oral skills, reading and grammar rather than on writing or homework assignments.

In summary, the interview data indicated that all of the participants acknowledged the importance of positive oral feedback in English language teaching at a very high level. This result is consistent with that of Marko (2007), Abbasi et al (2015), who suggested that verbal feedback and praise have a significant positive impact on the learners' motivation and hence their achievements. In addition, this finding is also in line with that of Mahdi and Saadany (2013), who showed that students were positive to oral feedback in the classrooms, especially explicit corrective feedback. (M=4.38, Min=3, Max=5). Besides, it is in line with that of Farah (2015), who suggested that the use of praise would influence students' positive engagement if it was given properly.

4.2. Current perceived practice of EFL teachers in giving positive oral feedback

4.2.1. Findings from questionnaire data

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of perceived practice of giving positive oral feedback of high school English teachers.

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
The perceived practice of giving positive oral feedback of high school English teachers.	50	3.50	4.63	4.05	.29134
1. The perceived practice of using positive oral feedback	50	3.00	4.67	4.09	.44172
2. Common patterns of positive oral feedback	50	3.33	4.83	4.08	.33545
3. The ways teachers provide positive oral feedback	50	3.00	4.75	3.94	.49374

To begin with, the data from Table 2 shows that the majority of the participants acknowledge the perceived practice of positive oral feedback in their classes (M=4.05 for the whole cluster and M=4.09 for reality of using positive oral feedback). A large number of the participants approved that positive oral feedback had to be focused on both praising for their students' proficiency and efforts, in which the latter makes up the greater agreement. Only some teachers confirmed that their students feel comfortable when being praised (M=3.56). The rest of them think that there are a certain number of students feel uncomfortable with praises. In summary, even though the mean score of the whole cluster of perceived practice of using positive oral feedback (4.05) is rather lower in comparison with that of the teachers' perception (4.39), it is still high in reference to the neutral level of 3 in the scale. This leads to the conclusion that both teachers' awareness and practice of handling positive oral feedback in EFL classrooms was positive despite the fact that there is a slight difference from theory to practice of giving positive oral feedback by EFL teachers.

Secondly, the results show that high school English teachers have applied positive oral feedback together with other positive reinforcement methods in their teaching activities to encourage their students' engagement as well as proficiency. They give their students

praises and at the same time show the part they do well. Some even gave them motivational verbal feedback even though their students do not give a complete response. The results therefore support the conclusion that it is necessary for upper secondary school English teachers to use positive oral feedback along with a variety of kinds of positive reinforcement with a view to helping their students feel more motivated as well as maintain excited about the lesson.

Finally, it was found out that going around the class giving positive oral feedback is the most preferable way used by English teachers. Teachers also give feedback with group work activities when doing their monitoring work. However, only half of the participants have the habit of giving feedback to individual students or while giving feedback at the end of each activity.

4.2.2. Findings from interview data

All of the interviewees agree that they benefit a lot from the use of positive oral feedback and say that it is a powerful tool because it allows teachers to selectively encourage different aspects of students' production or output. Some of them claimed that thanks to positive oral feedback, their students have been making progress in both academic performances and behaviours.

Firstly, the interview data showed that all the participants use a wide range of motivational phrases to praise their students whenever they perform well. These following motivational phrases are the most frequently used ones when EFL teachers were asked to list ten phrases they used to praise their students.

"good", "good job", "well done". "lovely", "excellent" "good idea". "great job", "wonderful", "perfect", "you're right".

Secondly, to make positive oral feedback more effective in EFL classrooms, all of the teachers stated that giving positive oral feedback should be meaningful, sincere, appropriate and specific as well as combined with other kinds of feedback if it is possible.

"...Praise should be given mindfully and take into account their individual ability. Students can pick up when we are not genuine, especially if we use the same words of praise over and over again." (Teacher 1)

"...positive oral feedback should be sincere. Praise students for something you're genuinely proud of. If you're not feeling it, odds are they won't either." (Teacher 2)

"...and the timing of praise is also important, interrupting a child when they are concentrating can make them lose their focus and reduce their motivation to continue on with the activity." (Teacher 7)

"...positive oral feedback instead should focus on specific examples of students' effort or accomplishment." (T3)

Some teachers considered giving positive oral feedback privately, which according to them, increases the potential for an honest exchange of ideas and an opportunity for the students to talk about his or her work.

In summary, this finding is consistent with that of Marko (2007), whose findings showed that teachers' verbal feedback and praise had a significantly positive impact on the learners' motivation. Besides, it is somewhat in line with Preston's study (1985), whose findings suggested that complements were said to make students feel good, but not significantly improve their skills.

4.2.3. Findings from class observation data

Firstly, the results collected and observed show that there was a slight difference from the perceived practice and real one in teachers' use of positive oral feedback. The majority of teachers just gave general motivational phrases or said *thank you* after receiving their students' responses. Even if positive oral feedback was given, it was repeated so many times, which led to the fact that students did not care about their teachers' praises.

Secondly, it was similar to what have been found from questionnaire data, the amount of positive oral feedback was given most frequently in teaching speaking skills and reading skills, which requires students' immediate responses.

Furthermore, there were five in eight teachers who tried to both encourage their students by motivational feedback and clarify what they did not do well. This made the classrooms more interesting and useful for their students' understanding.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study was devoted to positive oral feedback in EFL classrooms at some upper-secondary schools in Thua Thien Hue, focusing mainly on teachers' perceptions towards positive oral feedback and the current practice of giving positive oral feedback in EFL by English teachers. The major findings are that high school English teachers in Thua Thien Hue Province showed positive perceptions towards the use of positive oral feedback in EFL classrooms, and that the majority of them were highly aware of the importance and benefits of positive oral feedback in EFL classrooms. However, the techniques in giving positive oral feedback in EFL classrooms by English teachers were not as effective as their perceptions.

Based on the findings of upper secondary school English teachers' perceptions and practice of the technique in giving positive oral feedback in EFL classrooms, a number of pedagogical implications and recommendations for educational administrators and English teachers were drawn and suggested.

To administrators, first of all, it is crucial that school leaders and the English group leaders should focus more on classroom observations with proper themes for examination. Giving praises in classroom should be among the themes. Secondly, it is

necessary that both school leaders and teachers have good awareness of the technique, whether to use it for students' effort or performances and make every preparation for it.

To English teachers, first of all, they should be more aware of the importance and advantages of positive oral feedback in English language teaching, give more positive oral feedback in teaching, particularly in teaching speaking and reading, after students finish their performances, whether it is a correct or partially correct answer. Furthermore, teachers should give more positive oral feedback than negative one as well as correct their mistakes if possible. One more suggestion for English teachers is that there should be a combination of giving positive oral feedback and other kinds of feedback so that students are more likely to have a sense of confidence as well as know what part they are not really good at so as to make progress.

6. LIMITATIONS

Although much effort was put into this research paper, certain shortcomings are unavoidable. Firstly, the result of this study is based on the responses from a small number of the participants, who are English teachers at five different upper-secondary schools in Thua Thien Hue. Therefore, it is difficult to make some generalization of the results. In addition, there were only eight high school English teachers who were chosen to interview, which leads to the fact that the results from these interviews are less likely to be representative for all high school English teachers in Thua Thien Hue. If there were more participants participating in this study, the result would yield more diverse ideas, thus be more interesting and reliable.

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