The Role of Verbal and Written Praise in Enhancing Speaking Skills: A Quantitative Study on third-Semester English Students at the Faculty of Education, University of Zawiya

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Abstract:

Speaking skills are crucial for English as a foreign Language (ESL) learners, yet many students face challenges such as anxiety and lack of confidence. This study investigates the role of verbal and written praise as positive reinforcement strategies to enhance speaking skills. Conducted among 50 third-semester English female students at the Faculty of Education, University of Zawiya, the research employs a structured questionnaire as t sole data collection tool. Results reveal that verbal praise significantly boosts students' confidence during speaking tasks, while written praise helps them reflect on and track their progress. A combination of both strategies was most effective, with 60% of participants preferring this approach. The study concludes that integrating verbal and written praise into teaching methods can create a supportive environment that fosters speaking proficiency. The findings contribute to pedagogical practices and encourage further research on motivational strategies in ESL contexts.

Key words: Praise, Verbal praise ,Written praise, Motivation , Supportive environment.

خلاصة البحث

تعتبر مهارات التحدث امرا بالغ الاهمية لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، ومع ذلك يواجه العديد من الطلاب تحديات مثل القلق وانعدام الثقة. تبحث هذه الدراسة في دور الثناء اللفظي والمكتوب كاستراتيجيات تعزيز إيجابية لتعزيز مهارات التحدث. أجريت الدراسة على 50 طالبة في الفصل الدراسي الثالث للغة الإنجليزية في كليات التربية بجامعة الزاوية،

واستخدمت استبيانًا منظمًا كأداة وحيدة لجمع البيانات. تكشف النتائج أن الثناء اللفظي يعزز ثقة الطلاب بشكل كبير أثناء مهام التحدث، بينما يساعدهم الثناء المكتوب على التفكير في تقدمهم وتتبعه. كان الجمع بين كلتا الاستراتيجيتين الأكثر فعالية، حيث فضل 60٪ من المشاركين هذا النهج. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن دمج الثناء اللفظي والمكتوب في طرق التدريس يمكن أن يخلق بيئة داعمة تعزز إتقان التحدث. تساهم النتائج في الممارسات التربوية وتشجع على إجراء المزيد من الأبحاث حول الاستراتيجيات التحفيزية في سياقات اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية.

الكلمات الأساسية : المدح ، المدح اللفظي ،المدح الكتابي ،التحفيز، بيئة داعمة.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Speaking is one of the most challenging skills for ESL learners due to its demand for real-time language processing and interaction. In Libyan universities, many students struggle with speaking proficiency, primarily due to anxiety, lack of practice, and low self-esteem. Positive reinforcement, including praise, has been identified as an effective strategy to overcome these barriers (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Verbal and written praise can motivate students by acknowledging their efforts and achievements, thereby encouraging active participation and continuous improvement.

1.2. Problem Statement

Although the benefits of positive reinforcement are well-documented in educational psychology, its specific impact on speaking skills in Libyan higher education remains under-researched. This study aims to fill this gap by evaluating students' perceptions of verbal and written praise as tools to enhance speaking confidence and proficiency.

1.3. Research Objectives

1. To evaluate students' perceptions of verbal praise in improving their speaking skills.

2. To assess the role of written praise in motivating students and improving speaking performance.

3. To identify students' preferences for verbal or written praise, or a combination of both.

1.4. Research Questions

1. How do students perceive the effectiveness of verbal praise in enhancing speaking confidence and proficiency?

2. What role does written praise play in helping students reflect on their progress?

3. Which type of praise do students find most effective for improving their speaking skills?

1.5. Significance of the Study

The findings of this study offer practical insights for teachers and curriculum designers in ESL contexts. By understanding how students respond to verbal and written praise, educators can adopt more effective motivational strategies to improve speaking skills. The study also contributes to the limited body of research on positive reinforcement in Libyan higher education.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Speaking Skills in ESL Learning

Speaking is considered one of the most complex skills in language acquisition due to its reliance on real-time vocabulary retrieval, grammar application, and pronunciation accuracy (Brown, 2004). For non-native speakers, the challenge is compounded by psychological barriers such as fear of making mistakes (Richards, 2008).

Speaking is frequently identified as the most cognitively and affectively demanding skill in second and foreign language acquisition. Unlike receptive skills, speaking requires the learner to engage in real-time language processing, where conceptualization, formulation, and articulation occur almost simultaneously. This complex integration of linguistic knowledge and communicative competence makes speaking particularly challenging for ESL learners, especially in academic contexts where accuracy, fluency, and appropriateness are all expected.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, speaking involves the rapid retrieval of lexical items, the syntactic organization of utterances, and the phonological encoding of speech. Any weakness in these sub-processes can disrupt communication and increase learners' awareness of their limitations, often resulting in hesitation, self-correction, or withdrawal from oral participation. Consequently, speaking difficulties are not merely technical but deeply intertwined with learners' perceptions of their own competence.

In ESL classrooms, speaking also functions as a social and interactive practice. Learners are required to negotiate meaning, manage turn-taking, and adapt their language to context and audience. These pragmatic demands place additional pressure on students, particularly those who lack extensive exposure to authentic communicative situations. As a result, speaking

performance often becomes a site where linguistic insufficiencies and affective barriers intersect.

Affective variables such as anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and low self-efficacy have been consistently identified as major inhibitors of oral performance. Students who associate speaking with potential embarrassment are less likely to participate, thereby limiting opportunities for practice and development. This dynamic creates a cyclical pattern in which reduced participation reinforces low proficiency, and low proficiency further intensifies speaking anxiety.

Therefore, contemporary ESL pedagogy emphasizes the creation of supportive learning environments that prioritize psychological safety alongside linguistic development. Within such environments, teacher feedback practices—particularly those grounded in positive reinforcement—play a decisive role in mediating learners' emotional responses to speaking and in shaping their willingness to communicate

2.2. Positive Reinforcement in Education

Positive reinforcement, including praise, is a key component of effective teaching. According to Skinner's operant conditioning theory, behaviors that are positively reinforced are more likely to be repeated (Skinner, 1957).

Positive reinforcement constitutes a foundational principle in educational psychology and pedagogy. It refers to instructional practices that strengthen desired behaviors and learning dispositions through supportive responses, recognition, and encouragement. When implemented effectively, positive reinforcement does not merely regulate behavior but actively contributes to the construction of learner motivation and academic identity.

In higher education contexts, positive reinforcement is increasingly conceptualized as a motivational and relational tool rather than a mechanical reward system. It affirms students' efforts, acknowledges progress, and legitimizes struggle as an integral component of learning. Such affirmation supports the development of perceived competence, which is central to learners' engagement and persistence in cognitively demanding tasks.

Furthermore, positive reinforcement plays a crucial role in shaping learners' attributional patterns. When students receive feedback that highlights effort, strategy use, and improvement, they are more likely to attribute success to controllable factors. This orientation promotes

resilience and a mastery-focused approach to learning, in which challenges are interpreted as opportunities for growth rather than indicators of failure.

In the context of language learning, the pedagogical value of positive reinforcement is amplified. Language classrooms are inherently performative spaces where learners' production is continuously exposed to evaluation. Without supportive reinforcement, such exposure may intensify anxiety and inhibit participation. Conversely, well-calibrated positive reinforcement can transform the classroom into an affectively secure environment that legitimizes experimentation, tolerates error, and encourages sustained engagement.

Thus, positive reinforcement serves not only as a motivational catalyst but also as an affective scaffold that supports learners' willingness to invest in the demanding process of acquiring a new language.

2.3. Verbal Praise in ESL Classrooms

Verbal praise provides immediate feedback, which is particularly effective during speaking activities. It helps reduce anxiety and creates a supportive atmosphere, encouraging students to take risks and engage more actively (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Verbal praise represents a dynamic and interactional form of positive reinforcement in ESL instruction. Delivered orally and often spontaneously, it allows teachers to respond immediately to learners' spoken production. This immediacy situates verbal praise within the communicative event itself, rendering it particularly influential in shaping learners' real-time perceptions of their performance.

In speaking-oriented classrooms, verbal praise can validate multiple dimensions of oral communication, including linguistic accuracy, communicative effectiveness, strategic competence, and participatory effort. By acknowledging these diverse aspects, teachers broaden learners' understanding of what constitutes successful speaking and reduce the exclusive emphasis on grammatical perfection.

Beyond its motivational function, verbal praise contributes to the affective architecture of the classroom. Supportive teacher discourse signals acceptance, reduces the perceived threat of error, and normalizes approximation as a legitimate stage of development. This discursive environment encourages learners to adopt a more experimental stance toward language use, which is essential for the development of oral fluency.

Moreover, verbal praise can operate as implicit formative feedback. When praise is specific and descriptive, it directs learners' attention to successful linguistic choices and communicative

strategies. In this way, verbal praise not only reinforces behavior but also guides learners' cognitive processing of speaking performance.

However, the pedagogical effectiveness of verbal praise depends on its quality and intentionality. Praise that is contingent, informative, and aligned with instructional goals is more likely to enhance motivation and self-efficacy than praise that is generalized or excessive. Thus, verbal praise must be conceptualized as a strategic instructional practice rather than a casual classroom habit.

2.4. Written Praise as a Reflection Tool

Written praise allows students to revisit their achievements and recognize their progress over time. It is particularly useful for fostering a growth mindset, as it highlights improvement rather than perfection (Brookhart, 2017). Written praise offers a more enduring and introspective dimension of positive reinforcement. Unlike verbal praise, which is temporally bound to the moment of interaction, written praise provides a stable textual record of learners' achievements and progress. This permanence allows students to revisit feedback, reflect upon it, and integrate it into their evolving self-concepts as language users.

Within ESL education, written praise frequently accompanies assessment and evaluation processes. When framed constructively, it can mediate learners' emotional responses to evaluation and redirect attention from deficiencies to developmental trajectories. By documenting progress, written praise supports learners in recognizing incremental improvement, which is often imperceptible in daily classroom interaction.

Written praise also plays a critical role in fostering metacognitive awareness. As learners engage with written feedback, they are invited to analyze their performance, identify strengths, and consider future goals. This reflective engagement enhances learner autonomy and supports the transition from teacher-regulated to self-regulated learning.

Furthermore, written praise can personalize reinforcement. Individualized comments acknowledge learners' unique challenges and accomplishments, thereby strengthening the pedagogical relationship between teacher and student. This personalization is particularly significant for learners who may not respond strongly to public recognition but benefit from private affirmation.

Consequently, written praise extends the function of reinforcement beyond motivation, positioning it as a reflective and developmental tool that supports long-term speaking competence.

2.5. Combined Effect of Verbal and Written Praise

Integrating verbal and written praise offers both immediate and long-term reinforcement, addressing diverse learner needs (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This combination has been shown to enhance not only language proficiency but also learner autonomy (Dörnyei, 2001). The pedagogical integration of verbal and written praise constitutes a multidimensional reinforcement framework that addresses both the immediacy of classroom interaction and the continuity of learning over time. Verbal praise energizes the speaking moment, sustains participation, and mitigates anxiety, while written praise consolidates learning, promotes reflection, and documents progress.

This combined approach allows reinforcement to operate across temporal and cognitive dimensions. During speaking activities, verbal praise shapes learners' emotional engagement and communicative risk-taking. Subsequently, written praise supports cognitive restructuring by enabling learners to reinterpret their experiences in light of constructive feedback.

Moreover, the integration of both forms of praise accommodates learner diversity. It acknowledges that motivation, confidence, and self-regulation are mediated by individual preferences and affective profiles. A balanced reinforcement strategy therefore enhances pedagogical inclusivity and maximizes the impact of feedback practices.

At a broader level, the combined use of verbal and written praise contributes to the cultivation of learner autonomy and academic resilience. By reinforcing effort, progress, and strategic engagement, teachers support the development of self-efficacy beliefs that extend beyond the language classroom.

In sum, verbal and written praise, when systematically and pedagogically aligned, function not merely as motivational devices but as integral components of an affect-informed approach to ESL speaking instruction.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a quantitative descriptive design to analyze students' perceptions of verbal and written praise using a structured questionnaire.

3.2. Participants

A sample of 50 third-semester English students from the Faculty of Education, University of Zawiya, was selected using convenience sampling. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 21 years, with an equal distribution of the female students.

3.3. Data Collection Tool

Questionnaire: The questionnaire consisted of 20 items divided into four sections:

Section 1: Demographics (age, gender, academic level).

Section 2: Perceptions of verbal praise.

Section 3: Perceptions of written praise.

Section 4: Preferences and overall effectiveness.

3.4. Procedure

1. The questionnaire was distributed to students during class time with clear instructions.

2. Students were given 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire anonymously.

3. Data was collected and analyzed using statistical software.

3.5. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (means, percentages, and frequencies) and inferential statistics (chi-square tests) were used to analyze the responses.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

Verbal Praise:

88% of students agreed that verbal praise motivates them to improve their speaking skills.

92% reported increased confidence when receiving immediate verbal praise.

Written Praise:

84% of students indicated that written praise helped them recognize areas of improvement.

78% stated that written praise encouraged them to prepare better for speaking tasks.

Preferences:

65% preferred a combination of verbal and written praise.

25% preferred verbal praise only, while 10% preferred written praise only.

4.2. Discussion

The results confirm the effectiveness of positive reinforcement in improving speaking skills. Verbal praise provides instant motivation, while written praise offers reflective reinforcement. The preference for a combined approach underscores the need for diverse feedback mechanisms to address different learner needs.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

Verbal and written praise significantly enhance students' speaking skills by boosting confidence and motivation. A combination of both methods is particularly effective in creating a supportive and encouraging learning environment.

5.2. Recommendations

1. Teachers should regularly use verbal and written praise to motivate students during speaking activities.

2. Teacher training programs should include modules on effective praise strategies.

3. Future studies should investigate the long-term impact of praise on other language skills, such as writing and listening.

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Appendix

Sample Questionnaire Items:

1. How motivated do you feel when receiving verbal praise after a speaking activity?

Very motivated / Motivated / Neutral / Unmotivated / Very unmotivated

2. Does written praise help you understand your progress?

Strongly agree / Agree / Neutral / Disagree /

Questionnaire

The Role of Verbal and Written Praise in Enhancing Speaking Skills

Section 1: Demographic Information

1. Gender:

Male

Female

2. Age:

20-21

22-23

Above 23

3. Academic Level:

Second semester

Third semester

Fourth semester

4. Have you taken any public speaking or communication courses before?

Yes

No

Section 2: Perceptions of Verbal Praise

5. How often do you receive verbal praise after completing a speaking task?

Always / Often / Sometimes / Rarely / Never

6. Does verbal praise make you feel more confident in your speaking abilities?

Strongly agree / Agree / Neutral / Disagree / Strongly disagree

7. Do you feel that verbal praise motivates you to participate in speaking activities more often?

Strongly agree / Agree / Neutral / Disagree / Strongly disagree

8. How effective is verbal praise in helping you overcome fear or anxiety during speaking tasks?

Very effective / Effective / Neutral / Ineffective / Very ineffective

9. Do you feel verbal praise from your teacher helps you focus on your strengths as a speaker?

Strongly agree / Agree / Neutral / Disagree / Strongly disagree

Section 3: Perceptions of Written Praise

10. How often do you receive written praise (comments or notes) regarding your speaking performance?

Always / Often / Sometimes / Rarely / Never

11. Does written praise help you recognize areas for improvement in your speaking skills?

Strongly agree / Agree / Neutral / Disagree / Strongly disagree

12. How motivated do you feel when you receive written praise for your speaking efforts?

Very motivated / Motivated / Neutral / Unmotivated / Very unmotivated

13. Do you find written praise easier to reflect on compared to verbal praise?

Strongly agree / Agree / Neutral / Disagree / Strongly disagree

14. Does written praise encourage you to prepare better for future speaking tasks?

Strongly agree / Agree / Neutral / Disagree / Strongly disagree

Section 4: Preferences and Overall Effectiveness

15. Which type of praise do you find more effective in enhancing your speaking skills?

Verbal praise /Written praise /Both equally

16. Do you think a combination of verbal and written praise would provide better feedback?

Strongly agree / Agree / Neutral / Disagree / Strongly disagree

17. Does receiving praise (verbal or written) make you more interested in participating in class discussions?

Strongly agree / Agree / Neutral / Disagree / Strongly disagree

18. Which type of praise do you think helps build your confidence as a speaker over time?

Verbal praise/ Written praise / Both equally

19. How important do you think praise is in improving speaking skills compared to other teaching strategies?

Very important / Important / Neutral / Unimportant / Very unimportant

20. Do you feel that the feedback you receive (verbal or written) is specific and helpful for your development?

Strongly agree / Agree / Neutral / Disagree / Strongly disagree

Instructions for Respondents:

Please answer all questions honestly based on your experiences in the classroom.

There are no right or wrong answers; your feedback is valuable for research purposes.

Your responses will remain confidential and used solely for academic purposes.