

# The nature of praise and positive feedback in the young learner ELT classroom

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This dissertation was submitted by Ms Lesley Keast in March 2012 as part of the MA TESOL here at Sheffield Hallam. It was awarded a distinction both for its contribution to the field and for the extent and quality of the methodology applied. Lesley completed this piece of work in her own classroom context while studying for the MA as a distance learner.

## **Summary of the Dissertation.**

Lesley's interest in positive feedback emerged from her work with young learners ranging in age from 7-14. Noting that approaches to feedback varied in her teaching context and that there appeared to be little in terms of guidance and development in this area she set up a project in order to systematically investigate the nature of praise and feedback through observation of classes and teacher interviews. The aim was to understand further:

- why teachers give praise and positive feedback to young learners
- how frequently it occurs
- whether or not features change over the different age groups

Taking a social constructivist viewpoint of the dynamic classroom, Lesley explored and collated literature from both educational psychology and ELT to further understand the nature of positive feedback and its potential role in:

- scaffolding and motivating learning and
- nurturing young learner self-confidence and self esteem .

Her mixed method approach to the research was particularly innovative and interesting. Classes were video recorded and events identified and logged. Lesley used retrospective stimulated recall interviews with teachers as a means of eliciting their thoughts and reasons for giving praise / feedback at particular points. This is a rich but challenging method of data collection and Lesley developed insight and skill in approaching and managing this sensitively and supportively with her colleagues.

The process of logging and coding the data was extremely thorough and insightfully documented and through analysis of events and teachers' comments, Lesley was able to identify frequency of coded themes and explore experienced teachers' reasons for using different modes of feedback at specific times during their classes.

Findings revealed that frequency of praise and positive feedback in the YL ELT classroom was high compared to similar studies in mainstream classes although a high percentage of these occurrences related to procedurally "moving things on". Of those utterances which did praise contributions, the main motivator for teachers was to affirm and acknowledge individuals. All teachers observed showed sensitivity to their use of feedback in building individuals' confidence and developing identity.

## **Impact and practical potential of the ideas presented**

This dissertation was carried out in Lesley's own workplace and there is a clear impact on her own development as a research practitioner. This is discussed very insightfully in the reflective account of her growing understanding of cross-discipline work. Her "passion" as a teacher for nurturing and supporting young learners while being educated led the project from the start.

As Lesley highlights, the consistently high rates of praise and the degree of understanding that these teachers demonstrate is an asset to the ELT learning environment. Data analysis and findings provide an excellent resource and "real picture" for discussion and sharing of practice in this field. The information e.g. role of procedure vs praise and positive feedback alongside the quantity and features of non verbal praise, could form the basis for teachers in INSET to discuss their own practices and beliefs as a starting point for reflection in their own classrooms.

For teachers interested in developing their own research, Lesley's discussion and explanation of stimulated recall as part of classroom based methodology is imaginative and realistic. She shows an excellent awareness of research issues and processes and proposes various aspects of the research that could be explored and further developed by teachers in their own classrooms.

Similarly, this work would provide useful data for pre-service and in-service teacher education input. The importance of "rapport" is regularly discussed but not always clearly defined, particularly with pre-service teachers. Insight into what actually happens in young learner classrooms accompanied by a narrative given by teachers has rich potential for raising awareness and discussion about this aspect of our work and the impact on teachers and learners.

Lesley engages very successfully with both theoretical and pedagogic issues and practice with a clear impact on classrooms. She provides an excellent example for future Masters students wanting to explore both the topic of positive feedback alongside classroom research methods and the design and development of ethical and appropriate research instruments.

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