

Assignment

ECAD6007

Student Number: 2307050

Aim, focus and understanding of a critical incident

In the pursuit of creating a conducive learning environment, this essay will explore the role of verbal praise in the classroom. It will focus on the impact on pupil engagement, self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation within a mixed-ability classroom. This will be achieved by engaging with Tripp's critical incident methodology.

His theory encourages teachers to have a "diagnostic" approach to the classroom (Tripp, 2011, p.129). Tripp wants teachers to use reflective judgement to reveal their teaching practices and the values that underpin those daily routines. Tripp proposes that we challenge these techniques through reflection so that the chosen actions and their subsequent outcomes can further the teacher's understanding and knowledge of best practices.

The critical incident methodology that Tripp proposes has been used in this assignment to analyse and reflect on an observed classroom-based experience. The observed interaction was chosen because it encapsulates the idea that a critical incident occurs within every moment in the classroom. The moment observed was just an average student-teacher incident until it became critical through analysis and revelation of its underlying patterns and judgements.

The following exploration evolved from a critical incident observed in an English-medium secondary school in Cardiff. The school is near the city centre and serves a catchment area with high levels of social and economic disadvantage. (Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales, 2017)

As a researcher in this context, confidentiality rules will conform with BERA guidelines. This essay will also draw on the school's 2017 Estyn report. As their most recent report, this will provide context, support discussion and form conclusions.

The observation occurred while on a pupil trail with a year seven form group.

During the final period of the day, during a French lesson, that recapped numbers one to twenty.

The class was a group of mixed-ability students.

Educational theorists Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan support mixed-ability grouping of students. They introduced the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which emphasises the importance of autonomy in motivation and learning, and they have explored how mixed-ability can support the creation of a collaborative learning environment (2012).

Literature Review

Over the last six decades, using verbal praise as a positive reinforcer within the classroom has been a considerable research and debate topic.

The observed critical incident described in this assignment focuses on using praise in a mixed-ability Year 7 French lesson. This literature review will focus on the potential of praise to enhance a pupil's intrinsic motivation and encourage growth rather than a fixed mindset.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines praise as: *“To express your approval of or admiration for someone or something”* (Oxford University Press, 2023). Praise can be expressed verbally or nonverbally through facial expressions or gestures. Praise is distinct from acknowledgement or feedback, as they are neutral, and from encouragement, which is more future-oriented (Henderlong and Lepper, 2002, p.775).

In our culture, through the influence of experts in the field of psychology and education and mediated through self-help books and magazines, praise has become a natural part of our

interactions, especially with children. Praise has the feel-good factor, and neuroscience confirms this to be true. The sections of the brain that light up when we are given monetary rewards respond in the same way as when we are praised (Bhangsi and Delgado, 2015).

The concept of positive reinforcement emerged from behaviourism, specifically operant conditioning (O'Donohue and Ferguson, 2001), which is a learning method that employs rewards and punishments. According to operant theory, a desired behaviour will increase in frequency when a positive reward is used as a response. Teachers have, therefore, adopted praise as a simple, no-cost tool to reward student achievement, good behaviour, and engagement.

Many studies have shown that increased praise rates lead to positive student outcomes. Positive teaching environments, better teacher-student relationships, and increased instructional times are all linked to teacher praise (Floress et al., 2017).

However, from the 1980's, other studies began challenging the widely held belief that praise was always positively reinforcing. This research was informed by social learning theorists such as Albert Bandura, who suggested that "motivation played a significant role in the link between observation and change in behaviour" (Gray and MacBlain, 2015, p.126).

Bandura viewed motivation as a critical element of child development and believed self-efficacy was central to education. Bandura brought the discussion away from a linear understanding of cause and effect, praise and dopamine, even though it is a factor at play; instead, he made sure that there was an emphasis placed on the context of social and cognitive elements all informing the situation.

In Bandura's view, agency refers to the belief that one can exert much control over important events in one's life. This proactive view means that people do not simply react to events but rather make them happen (Schunk and DiBenedetto, 2023, p.206).

Studies indicate that praise can undermine a child's motivation, create excessive pressure to continue to perform well, discourage risk-taking and reduce a student's sense of self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation (Henderlong and Lepper, 2002).

Most of these studies have examined how praise impacts a pupil's motivation to engage with a particular task. It follows a relatively standard methodology, i.e., a pupil performs a task and the pupil is praised immediately afterwards. After a brief delay, the child completes a questionnaire on how interesting they found that task and how motivated they are to repeat it.

In this complex field of research, results appear contradictory, and the studies are difficult to compare. They do not use a standard coding method for the praise given, often fail to employ a no-praise control group and work with children at different developmental stages.

Some indicate that praise increases a pupil's engagement with a task, whereas others show a decrease (Henderlong and Lepper, 2002).

However, let us move away from a behavioural perspective where the focus is purely on the observable results, i.e., responses to a questionnaire. We see a different picture emerging in the words of Daniel T. Willingham.

The bulk of these studies do not actually contradict each other at all. Praise is a complex phenomenon, but a relatively clear picture has emerged that provides guidelines as to when and why praise will-and will not- be beneficial (2014, para.5).

Henderlong and Lepper's (2002) study describes these guidelines well, where they identified a set of conceptual variables that appear to moderate the effectiveness of praise. They argued that:

If praise is deemed sincere, then praise will enhance intrinsic motivation when it encourages performance attributions to controllable causes, promotes autonomy, enhances competence without an overreliance on social comparisons, and conveys attainable standards and expectations (Henderlong and Lepper, 2002, p.774).

In this assignment, I focus on two highlighted variables, sincere praise and praise that encourages performance attributions to controllable causes, e.g., praise of the process rather than the person (Dweck and Leggett, 1988). It will then relate these variables to the observed critical incident within the discussion section to reflect on how it might inform my future practice in the classroom.

Sincere Praise

The perceived sincerity of praise has been highlighted as a significant variable for moderating the impact of praise on a student's motivation. The features of praise associated with perceived insincerity are overly general, highly effusive or contradicted by other words or behaviours, such as being delivered only after an extended pause (Henderlong and Lepper, 2002). This would have negative motivational consequences as children would be more likely to dismiss this type of praise. Therefore, teachers must ensure the praise given is specific, genuine, and not excessive so pupils do not find it easy to dismiss.

The perceived sincerity of praise may also depend on the quality of the student-teacher relationship. This is mediated by factors such as teacher fairness and every student feeling a valued member of the school community (Tillery et al., 2013).

Performance Attributions

A key feature of praise is its potential to communicate messages about the causes of success or achievement. Theorists have made the distinction between process-directed praise which is attributed to controllable, changeable attributions for performance (e.g., effort, strategy) and person-directed praise, attributed to uncontrollable, stable attributions (e.g. ability, intelligence) (Brummelman et al., 2014).

Person praise moves attention away from the task to the self and provides limited information about achievement and learning. In contrast, process praise is directed to effort, self-regulation, engagement, or processes relating to the task. (e.g., you were excellent as you have worked hard to complete the assignment by applying the relevant themes”) This can increase self-efficacy and improve commitment to accomplishing a task, and therefore, the effects of this type of praise are much more significant (Hattie and Timperley, 2007).

Also, praise focused on the person relies on the judgement or evaluation of the teacher. In contrast, praise focused on the process behind the task's achievement encourages students to reflect on their efforts and strategies for success. This can support an increase in intrinsic motivation as opposed to extrinsic motivation, where a student might continue to look for teacher approval in the future.

This distinction between process-directed and person-directed praise links with the work of Carol Dweck, who introduced the concept of growth and fixed mindsets. Dweck proposes that the individual's mindset can be altered or reinforced by the type of praise they receive.

Person-directed praise has the potential to reinforce a fixed mindset. This can lead to failure for students when facing challenging situations, as they will believe that if they can not complete the task now with their abilities, they will never be able to in the future. Meanwhile, process praise encourages a growth mindset where the student believes that through their efforts, they can change, adapt and improve (Dweck, 2017).

Dweck's theory, however, has come under a great deal of scrutiny, even though it is based on several decades of "precise, peer-reviewed academic research. The problem is more to do with the implementation of a growth mindset, something seems to get lost in translation from research into practice" (Nottingham and Larsson, 2018). Dweck herself wrote in a 2017 article that her research has been misrepresented and misused to some extent. She proposes that successfully implementing her work requires more than teaching an intervention or simply encouraging a student to work hard and be more open-minded. She would encourage educators to reflect on their mindsets and where they sit on the mindset continuum for various abilities and tasks. This would help them encourage their students to do the same for a particular aspect of their mindset associated with a specific task (failure, difficulty).

Suppose the correct type of praise ultimately leads to growth mindsets, which we know from the research can positively impact lifelong learning. In that case, finding ways to support the translation of the growth mindset research into teaching practice is an important endeavour. Later in this paper, we will look at how the pedagogical choice of using metacognition can support this within the classroom.

Explanation of Case Study

The critical incident I observed has allowed me to explore the research surrounding positive reinforcement within a diverse learning environment and its role in creating an inclusive classroom. The incident observed was in a year 7 French class five weeks into the autumn term. It was a mixed-ability class of 25 students who had just come from a Welsh lesson into this final lesson of the day. The students sat at two tables spaced out across the room (four across), all facing the whiteboard. This form group has all their classes together at this stage of the term before they are moved into sets later in the year.

To provide further context, there are currently 1,721 pupils on roll, including 344 in the sixth form, and 32.7% are eligible for free school meals (Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales, 2017), which is considerably higher than the national average. And "around 35% of pupils have a special educational need, above the national average" (Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales, 2017, p.1).

Regarding the diversity in the school, the report notes, "Approximately 70% of pupils come from a minority ethnic background and speak English as an additional language. Over 60 different languages are spoken within the school community" (Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales, 2017, p.1) "The school is based in an area where 60% of pupils live in the 20% most deprived areas of Wales" (Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales, 2017,p.1). The school has a clear process for discipline and classroom management and uses class charts to support this process.

The observed incident saw the use of verbal praise and class charts to reward a student for a correct answer to a question.

Student K was sitting at the front of the classroom, on a table on the far left of the room. The students were sitting two at a table, facing the board, so student K had another student sitting to their right. At the beginning of the lesson, student K had asked to borrow a pen from the teacher and had required one-on-one teacher support to engage with the starter activity. The student was then quiet, slightly slouching in their chair, distractedly looking around the room and not volunteering any answers to the teacher's questions.

The students were asked to focus on recapping their number skills and counting in French. Halfway through the lesson, the students were asked if they remembered the number song for 1 to 10 in French they had learned in the previous lesson. A few students put their hands up, including student K, who was now looking at the teacher with his hands up.

The teacher initially called on student T, who, when called upon, became shy and self-conscious and shook their head, signalling that they would not sing it.

The teacher then chose Student K, who started to sing clearly and loudly so the whole class could hear them. They sang the number song from one to ten with accuracy. Once student K finished, the teacher's facial expression changed. It now expressed genuine delight with surprise and admiration for student K's accomplishment. Then, the teacher burst into spontaneous applause, and all the students joined in. Once the applause had subsided, the teacher gave student K verbal praise.

The teacher said, 'Well done, that was great singing,' and then announced that she would give student K two class chart points, one for bravery and the other for subject knowledge.

Student K's posture and demeanour then changed. They were smiling, sitting up straight in their chair while looking towards the teacher. Through their non-verbal gestures, the teacher had indicated that singing in front of the class was a significant achievement.

The observed critical incident was, I believe, demonstrating a link between spontaneous, sincere praise and its visible impact on a student's engagement and motivation for learning, mediated through a sense of self-efficacy and competency.

The use of verbal praise within this observed critical incident illustrates more of a person-focused as opposed to a process-focused example of teacher praise.

Teaching and Learning Methods

The findings from the literature review will now inform the teaching and learning methods I would consider adopting to address this critical incident.

Before even delving into the words used when praising a student, it has to be perceived as sincere to positively impact a student's intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy and student-teacher relationships.

Spontaneous applause and facial expressions of delight on the part of the teacher would have communicated to the student that the teacher's praise was genuine and sincere. This would have ensured that the teacher's verbal praise of "well done" and "great singing" was more readily received. As noted in the literature review, the features of praise associated with perceived insincerity are when the praise is contradicted by other words or behaviours or

delivered only after an extended pause (Henderlong and Lepper, 2002). In the observed critical incident, teacher praise was given immediately, and the words and behaviours were consistent. For student K, it was evident in their posture change, increased eye contact with the teacher and improved engagement for the remainder of the lesson. The praise received, and their accurate completion of the task positively impacted their motivation, self-efficacy and engagement.

Reflecting on this in my practice, I would emphasise developing trusting and genuine relationships with students, providing an environment where praise can occur naturally and spontaneously.

This literature review has opened up many questions and reflections on how I will use praise effectively in the classroom. It has highlighted the power of words to support and to hinder and the responsibility that rests on me as a teacher to use praise carefully and mindfully in the classroom.

Drawing on what I have learnt from the findings on how to praise in a way that promotes a growth mindset culture in students, I would look to provide process rather than 'person-praise' as proposed by Dweck (2006).

The observed critical incident was of a student being praised for singing a numbers song, being told "well done and excellent singing" by the teacher and given points for being brave and learning the song.

It demonstrated praise given for the finished article or the product. In this instance, it was 'excellent singing' and 'well done.' Combining this with more additional information and making

it more process-oriented would have ensured that it encouraged a growth mindset, e.g. “excellent singing, I love how you have practised your talent at singing to learn the numbers song”. Regarding the allocation of points for a reward chart, as referred to earlier (Deci, Koestner and Ryan, 1999), these types of extrinsic rewards hinder intrinsic motivation, particularly in the case of more engaging learning tasks. The points received were for bravery and for successfully performing the learning task. For my teaching methods in this incident, I would choose not to use this extrinsic reward but instead use the opportunity to provide more informative process praise to ensure I was encouraging a growth mindset and meta-cognition, a pedagogical choice I will explore further in the discussion and recommendations section.

Praise directed to Student K :

‘You demonstrated courage to sing in front of the class like that. Singing in front of an audience is very challenging, so well done for stepping out of your comfort zone.’

Praise directed to Student T:

‘Well done for putting effort into learning the number’s song; you showed courage by volunteering to sing, and next time, you could try again.’

With this extra information, Student K would be more likely to leave the lesson reflecting on how they met this challenge and achieved a successful outcome and less on the teacher’s judgement of their qualities. If they were to apply themselves similarly when facing future challenges, they know they have the resources to succeed. Student T would be more likely to leave the session reflecting on the fact that the anxiety they had experienced was typical in that circumstance and that there would be no reason why next time they would not be able to do it. Without this praise, Student T might feel they could not demonstrate their learning because they was not brave, thus encouraging a more fixed mindset.

My review of the literature in this area of praise will most definitely reflect on my use of language in every interaction with every student. I will aim to avoid praise that does not contain some task-related information. This type of praise will be converted into greater student understanding, dedication to the learning goals, increased self-efficacy, and engagement with a task.

Discussion, recommendations and conclusions

As I start considering my pedagogical choices, informed by the literature and relevant teaching and learning methods, I have discovered that encouraging a growth mindset through effective praise can be mediated through the process of meta-cognition.

Meta-cognition is a process first described within psychology and can be defined as thinking about one's thinking (Tanner, 2012).

As discussed, using metacognition as part of my teaching methods directly supports the development of a growth mindset in students. Using process praise in the way described in the literature would demonstrate to students the process of meta-cognition as I, the teacher, share my thoughts on how they have faced challenges and failures or used specific strategies to achieve success. The benefit of being taught the language of meta-cognition for students will be lifelong, as attention is brought to how they make their decisions about learning and the value of the effort they put in through their reflection and thinking processes.

It is important to note that the importance of creating lifelong learners has been set out in the four purposes by Curriculum for Wales, and meta-cognition being utilised in the classroom can play its part in achieving this (Welsh Government, 2020).

Research has also shown that a teacher's mindset about students' learning abilities significantly impacts students' engagement, outcomes, motivation, and sense of belonging (Muenks et al., 2021). As previously discussed, the way praise is given plays a vital part in this mindset shift and effectively supports students in moving into a new thinking pattern and not remaining stuck in a fixed mindset pattern.

Regarding my school practice, my findings and the critical incident methodology have dramatically impacted how I now view the use of praise. I will be much more mindful of its potential impact to hinder or improve intrinsic motivation. I would use process praise to help support students into a growth mindset, where they are motivated and challenged and know the value of perseverance and good strategies. I will set high expectations and plan to challenge them in their work and their thinking.

I will encourage them to learn from their mistakes and support them in self-regulating and self-assessment through how I model my behaviour and share my growth mindset thinking process.

Regarding professional standards, this pedagogical practice of metacognition explicitly links to the expectations of advancing and influencing teaching practice. These two subheadings are a part of the pedagogy standards outlined for teachers in Wales. Under these subheadings are expectations about students' progression and reflection on their learning. As well as the expectation of creating real-life, authentic contexts for students. The process of meta-cognition will help support the development of real-life strategies and skills that students can use when faced with problems in their everyday lives.

Conclusion

All teachers must reflect on their practice and implement their next steps from this pondering. The observations conducted for this essay used Tripp's methodology, which prompts a reflective practice. This model of reflection built a foundation for continual and consistent reflective practice, and it is clear from the teaching standards that this is an expectation for all teachers in Wales.

The observed incident was reviewed and scrutinised through the relevant academic literature. This uncovered the vast and, at times, contradictory research findings using verbal praise in an educational setting. However, specific incident-relevant teaching and learning methods were brought to the fore and discussed. In conclusion, it was made clear that in future practice, praise can be an effective tool for increasing a student's intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy when used to encourage a growth, not a fixed mindset.

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