TEACHER PRAISES AND STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT IN EFL CLASSROOM
(A case study of seventh grade students at one of junior high school in Bandung)

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ABSTRACT: The study analyzed the use of praise and its influence toward students' engagement. Qualitative approach was employed in this study. The obtained data were analyzed by using the theory of effective praise by Conolly et al (1995) and also the theory of characteristics of students' engagement by Jones (2009). The data of this study were obtained from classroom observation. 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.

Keywords: praise, reward, student's engagement

Introduction

Mastering English, as foreign language, provides a wide opportunity for an individual to raise his/her standard living in today's society (Bouguerne, 2011). It is very important for us as our *weapon* to participate in the wider world of work in the international relationship. This reality makes many Indonesian parents encourage their children to learn English. They believe that mastering English will give benefit for their children in the future.

Students' engagement becomes a crucial thing in learning process. The linkage between students' engagement and their academic achievement is undeniable (Lim, 1992; Wudong, 1994; Zhou, 1991 as cited in Tsou, 2005). Studies have shown that students' academic achievement seems to be higher when they participate actively in class than that of those who are passive in class.

Students' engagement occurs when students are motivated so they learn actively in class. Motivation as the essence of language teaching is important because of the stark realities of learning English for most of students (Rost, 2006). Harmer

(2001) proposes that without motivation teacher will almost certainly fail to make the necessary effort. Okolo (1995) believes that students who are motivated to learn are those who pay attention to the teacher and maintain interest in academic activities, volunteer answers in class, ask for guidance when needed, persist in trying to solve problems themselves, complete activities above and beyond those required for a grade, and take risks in order to improve their own skills or knowledge. Therefore, to achieve successful learning, motivation becomes an essential element that requires consideration when developing, monitoring, and assessing instructional effectiveness (Bouguerne, 2011).

There are some ways to increase students' motivation; one of them is by giving a reward to the students. Brown (2000) says that the most powerful rewards are those that can motivate learners intrinsically. Reward is one of the teaching tools that can improve students' motivation in learning something. Reward is considered as something given in exchange for good behavior or good work. Giving reward is not only by giving thing to students, but can also by praising students' effort. Bouguerne (2011) argues that praise is one of form of reward that

can be given verbally or written for accomplishing a particular task.

Based on the facts above, the researcher would like to conduct a study of junior high school students that focuses on teacher's praises and students' engagement in EFL classroom. This study is conducted to the previous study by Burnett and Mandel (2010). Their study is focused on the use of praise and feedback in the primary classroom.

This study is conducted to discover how the teacher uses praise and its influence toward students' engagement. Hopefully, the result of this study will inspire English teachers to be more creative in developing the techniques or activities in teaching English and praising students wisely.

- **Praise**

Reward is one of the teaching tools that can improve students' motivation in learning something. Rewards can be categorized into intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. The examples of external reward are tangible, verbal like praise, informational and controlling.

Praise is a form of reward that can be verbal or written. Kamal and Gallahue (1980) proclaim that praise and criticism are used at a large scale to urge the wished behaviours and to transmit information. Praise can play a crucial role in motivating

students if the teachers have enough information of when and how to use it.

A praise is often called as positive feedback. It contains explicit positive performance feedback. The term 'praise' itself is derived from the latin verb *pretiare,* which means to value highly (Shepell, 2000). The praises produced by the teacher must contain positive affect and have to be more intense, detailed response to the students' behavior than feedback (Blote, 1995).

Brophy (1981) argues that praise is one of a verbal reward that has been highly recommended as an important reinforcement method for teacher because it can build self-esteem and build a close relationship between students and teacher.

- **Teacher praise**

Teacher's praise is teacher' strategy to manage classroom and students' behavior with a long and thorough base of empirical support (Partin *et al,* 2010). The quality of teacher's praise is an important determinant of its effectiveness in increasing students' positive engagement. Again, the use of praise will be effective if the teacher knows well when and how to use it.

According to Partin *et al* (2010) there are several criteria a teacher should consider to consistently and purposefully evaluate the effectiveness of their praise in increasing the desired behaviors. First, is

the praise given by the teacher contingen on and linked to student behaviors that the teacher wishes to increase? Second, do the teacher's statements of praise provide informative feedback for the students? Third, do the teacher's statements of praise provide opportunities for positive interactions between teacher and each student? Fourth, are students' diverse skill levels considered when providing praise? Those criteria should be considered so the teacher knows the effectiveness of giving praise in the classroom. A teacher's praise should be distributed wisely to meet the wished behaviour of each student.

There are four-step teaching processes in giving effective praise proposed by Connolly *et al* (1995): description of appropriate behavior, rationale, request acknowledgment, and positive consequence. Description of appropriate behavior is labeling skill and providing specific behavioral descriptions on the praise given to the students (Connolly *et al,* 1995). This step increases students' level of understanding class materials and also the possibility that the students will repeat the behavior.

Meanwhile, a rationale emphasizes students' benefit gain from learning about the consequences of the behavior. It let students understand why a specific behavior is beneficial to them or others (Connolly *et al,* 1995). Students are more

likely to do something asked by the teacher when they know the good reason for doing it. This also makes students view the teacher as more concerned and fair person.

Each student has a different capability in understanding the classroom material. Some students may have understood the material on teacher's first explanation, while the other may not. The request acknowledgment step is aimed to make sure that the students give their attention to the teacher explanation and also to find out are the students understood it or not (Connolly *et al,* 1995). Request for acknowledgement should be given again and again during teaching and learning process.

The last step, positive consequences, help teacher to construct rapid behavior change if it is combined with specific teaching skill. In this stage a teacher gives positive consequences to students for engaging in the specific appropriate behavior. The positive consequences, which are considered as reward, would strengthen and reinforce the students' behavior if used effectively.

- **Students' engagement**

The words that describe students' engagement are passion and excitement (Barkley, 2010). Student who are engaged in the learning are motivated and bonded to learning, have a sense of belonging and achievement, and also have a connection with those who support learning (Jones, 2009). Students' engagement is an essential part of students' outcome in classroom. The relation between students' engagement and students' outcome is powerful, so it is important to know in what kind of condition the relationship occurs (Harper and Quaye, 2009).

Teacher should maintain students' enthusiasm and make sure that teacher enjoys what they do, so the student will engage positively. However, teacher can create classroom conditions that promotes students' engagement, while to be engaged or not is absolutely students' choice (Barkley, 2010)

Methodology

The qualitative approach was employed in this study. The purpose of qualitative approach is to understand, describe and explain beliefs, behaviors and meaning in context-specific settings (Wu and Volker, 2009).

The populations of this research were an English teacher of EFL classroom and the students of seventh grade in one public Junior High School in Bandung, enrolled in academic year 2014/2015. The instrument used to obtain the data in this study was classroom observation. It was

aimed to find out how teacher praise their students and its effect toward students engagement.

- **Population and sample**

The populations of this research were English teacher of EFL classroom and the students of seventh grade in one public Junior High School in Bandung, enrolled in academic year 2014/2015. There are six classes in this grade with the number of students is 260. The age of the students is around 12 years old. The selected sample of this research is VII-E class with 35 students.

- **Data collection**

The instrument used to obtain the data in this study was classroom observation. It was aimed to find out how teacher praised their students and its effect toward students engagement. The observation was conducted three times. Every class session took 60 minutes long. It was done on 6, 10 and 17 February 2015. The classroom observation was done by using video recorder. Each actual class activity during the lesson was recorded, especially when the teacher gave praise to the students.

- **Data analysis**

Data analysis is the step used after collecting the data as the interrelated steps. The analysis would be presented in the form of descriptive explanation. Data from classroom observation were analyzed by categorizing them to the teacher's praise and students' engagement.

There were four teaching processes in giving effective praise proposed by Connolly *et al* (1995): description of appropriate behavior, rationale, request acknowledgment, and positive consequence. The praise produced by the teacher will be categorized based on the theory above.

The observable students' engagement will be categorized based on the theory by Jones (2009). The data were used to see students' positive body language, consistent focus, verbal participation, student confidence and also fun and excitement.

Data Presentation and Discussion

The findings of teacher's strategies in giving praise to the students were categorized based on the theory of effective praise by Connolly *et al* (1995). This part also provides the common praises produced by the observed teacher. To reveal how praise influence students' engagement, the students' behavior was observed and categorized based on the theory by Jones (2009).

- **Teacher's Strategies in Giving Praise to the Students**

During the lesson, the teacher was found giving praise to the students. It was

given for every positive thing that any student did. The table below shows the general praise produced by the teacher in the class and will be elaborated based on the theory by Connolly *et al* (1995) about effective praise:

Table 1
Kinds of praises given by the teacher during the lesson

Praise	Verbal/action
Saying "okay, good!"	Verbal
Saying "Very good!"	Verbal
Saying "okay!"	Verbal and action
Saying "good job!" while giving thumbs up	Verbal and action
Saying "very good" while giving thumbs up	Verbal and action
Saying "Okay, give applause to your friend" while clapping her hand	Verbal and action
Saying "Yes, alright" while writing on her scoring book	Verbal and action
Saying "okay good job" while writing on her scoring book	Verbal and action
Saying "Okay, thank you for the entire groups who have performed in front of the class. You did a good job"	Verbal
Saying "Okay, good job, again give applause for all of you" while clapping her hand	Verbal and action
Saying "Okay, thank you"	Verbal
Saying "Good job students" while giving thumbs up	Verbal and action
Saying "You can have a good point to help your score"	Verbal
Saying "Okay thank you, everyone!" while clapping her hand	Verbal and action
Saying "Alright, very good!"	Verbal
Saying "Good!"	Verbal
Giving thumbs up while saying "very good!"	Action and verbal
Saying "Okay, very good!"	Verbal
Saying "Good, very good!"	Verbal
Saying "Okay good job!" while giving thumbs up	Verbal and action
Saying "Good job!" while clapping her hand	Verbal and action
Saying "Alright, very good!" while giving thumbs up	Verbal and action

The effectiveness of praising students depends on how the teacher delivers it. Based on the data of classroom observation, the observed teacher in this study gave praise to the students in four steps: description of appropriate behavior, rationale, request acknowledgment, and positive consequence. These steps belong to the theory by Connolly *et al* (1995).

- **Description of Appropriate Behavior**

In the middle of teaching-learning process, the teacher told the students that they were not allowed to use electronic dictionary. She proposed the students to use dictionary and explained the advantages of using dictionary in learning English. According to her, using real dictionary would help the students to enrich their vocabulary. Once they tried to search the meaning of a word in dictionary, they would also read the other words. It would unconsciously increase their English vocabulary. Besides, there was a part available in dictionary that would help the students to pronounce the word in correct way. The expression that indicated as description of appropriate behavior was**:**

"Thanks for those who bring dictionary and use it in the English class"

The expression above is addressed to the students who bring dictionary and use it as well in learning English. The teacher labelled the appropriate behavior, which was in this case was bring dictionary, in order to tell students that brought and used dictionary in English class is a good behavior and hopefully would stimulate the students to repeat the behavior.

On the second day of the observation, the teacher asked the last four groups who had not performed the last activity. Actually, the teacher only asked the members of each group to read a fable story in front of the class. Surprisingly, they did a role play while narrating the story. The next expression that indicated as description of appropriate behavior was:

"Okay, thank you for the entire groups who have performed in front of the class. You did a good job. You acted like real actor and actress. I don't ask you to have the role play, but it was not a problem for me. I liked your job but please, be serious."

The expression was addressed to the students who performed in front of the class. They were so good in performing the role play, until the rest of the students got excited with the show. The teacher was satisfied with their work, but she was afraid that the rest of the students only entertained with the show and did not get the ideas in the story.

- **Rationale**

In this part, the teacher explained the students the benefit of doing something good. The topic discussed in the classroom was about narrative text, so the students were being taught about its language features by the teacher. The teacher also gave the description about the differences between past tense and present tense. The expression that indicated as rationale was:

"So it is important for you to have the note"

To check students understanding about past tense and present tense, the teacher gave a quiz for the students. The quiz consisted of 5 sentences in positive, negative and interrogative form. The teacher asked the students to change the form of the sentences from positive to negative and interrogative, from negative to positive and interrogative, and from interrogative to positive and negative. The quiz was about the transformation of the verb one to verb two and vice versa.

In this quiz, students were allowed to open their dictionary and their note. The teacher told the students that they were not allowed to open their note anymore in an examination day. Hence, the teacher asked the students to write something about what

have been taught in their note book, especially about the transformation of irregular and regular verb.

● **Request Acknowledgment**

Request acknowledgment is aimed to make sure that the students pay attention to the teacher explanation and understand the rationale given by the teacher. The expressions that indicated as request acknowledgment were:

"Do you understand?"

"Any question?"

The expressions above werw given by the teacher to the student after the teacher explained the material. These types of expression should be given frequently in teaching-learning process to find out whether the students paid attention and understood the teacher's explanation.

Based on the classroom observation data, the observed teacher always asked for the students' acknowledgment every time she finished explain the material. She asked for students' understanding about the material. If the students seemed confused, she would repeat the explanation and gave more examples.

The next expression that indicated as request acknowledgment was:

"After all, is that important for you to remember irregular and regular verb?

This expression was given after the teacher explained how important it was to remember irregular and regular verb in learning English. The teacher also asked the students to write twenty words of irregular and regular verb on their note to help them in their examination day.

● **Positive Consequence**

Teacher should appreciate students' positive behavior by giving them a reward. This reward is aimed to reinforce the students' positive behavior. In this step, teacher labeled the students' positive behavior and the reward. The expression that indicated as positive consequence was:

"Prepare yourself to answer the question from this group. You can have a good point to help your score."

Based on the above expression, the teacher invited the students to participate in the activity. The teacher wished the students to be more active, and give additional score as reinforce for those who involved.

● **The Effect of Praise toward Students' Engagement**

The praises above were effectively influence students' positive engagement. It was proven by students' observable behavior during the lesson. According to Jones (2009) there are five characteristics of students' engagement that can be

examined using direct observation: positive body language, consistent focus, verbal participation, students' confidence, and fun and excitement.

- **Positive Body Language**

Jones (2009) states that positive body language exhibit body postures that indicate attention to the peer or teacher. The body postures that refer to positive body language are eye contact, the position of the head, leaning forward or backward, and position of arms. Those indicated the students' level of interest and attention.

Based on the classroom observation data, the students seemed to follow the teacher's movement while explaining the lesson. It meant that the students were trying to make eye contacts with the teacher and paid a lot of attention to the teacher's explanation. When the teacher explained the material in front of the class, some of the students noted what teacher said because they wanted to record the teacher explanation on their note book as their learning guide, and the rest just kept their eye to the teacher without making any notes because they cannot do different things in the same time. For some students, wrote something on the book while the teacher explained the material would make them lost and did not get what the teacher said. Both making notes and staying focus were considered as positive

body language as long as it has something to do with the lesson.

- **Consistent Focus**

Consistent focus is indicated by students' attention on the learning activity with minimum disruptions (Jones, 2009). According to Stovall's (2003) the disruption that possibly occurred in classroom activity were playing with gadget, doing task for another classes, listening to others talking about unrelated topic, disturbing other, and being passive in the learning.

According to the classroom observation data, there were only a few students who play with gadget during the class. They said that gadget helped them as their electronic dictionary to find out the meaning of words. The teacher banned the students to play with their gadget. She provided the reasons why it is good to use real dictionary rather than electronic dictionary on the gadget. According to her, using real dictionary would help the students to enrich their vocabulary. Once they tried to search the meaning of a word in dictionary, they would also read the other words. It would unconsciously increase their English vocabulary.

Moreover, there were no students found doing task for another classes. The teacher always walked around and monitored the students' activity. The situation of the classroom was very

conducive. There was a good communication between teacher and students. The students were also easily to understand the teacher's explanation.

The main disruption that always appeared in this classroom was the students keep talking and disturbing their peer. They were talking about unrelated topic in the middle of teacher's explanation. This situation resulted in some noises. Therefore, the teacher frequently requested for students' acknowledgment. However, this situation was very common in classroom environment. It was not a big deal if the teacher knew how to face it and control the class.

As mentioned before, there was a good communication between teacher and students that make the class environment conducive. The teacher asked the students to give verbal contribution by asking their opinion about the material in the middle of the explanation. In the other way, the students also asked what they do not understand to the teacher without any hesitation. In conclusion, the students were not likely to be passive in class.

- **Verbal Participation**

The next observable characteristic of students' engagement is verbal participation. There are three categories of this characteristic: asking related topic to

the teacher or peer, sharing opinion in class discussion, and sharing opinion in group discussion. The situation of the classroom was very conducive since there were a good communication between teacher and students. The students gave their verbal contribution by asking related topic to the teacher. This occurred when the teacher was conveying materials and provided some examples. In this case, after the teacher explained about the characteristic of past tense and gave the example of past tense, the students sometime asked the teacher to make sure that they got the topic.

Students also gave their verbal contribution when the teacher was walking around and checking students' work. Some of them refused to ask the teacher in the middle of the explanation, and felt more comfortable to ask the teacher directly when the teacher monitoring the class. The students also asked related topic to the teacher when the teacher was giving a task. The main thing that students asked was the instruction of the task. Students' verbal participation has something to do with individual attention. The teacher always gave the opportunities to the students to share ideas or answer question by pointing out some students.

- **Student Confidence**

Students' self- confidence is very important in the teaching-and learning process. If students do not have enough

Students' confident affects the communication between teacher and students.

In this case, the students seemed to have enough confident. It was indicated by their improvisation when doing the given task in front of the class. Basically, the teacher asked the students to read a story in front of the class with their group. However, some of them improvised it by doing a role play. Role play required more confident compared to reading a text in front of the class.

Another thing that indicated the high confidence of the students was their willingness to contribute in classroom activity. The provided students' contribution included: sharing an opinion, asking about the material that has not been understood, and answering the question that the teacher gave. These, of course, affected the level of class effectiveness. The high students' confidence level would make the classroom atmosphere alive.

- **Fun and Excitement**

Humor in class will avoid awkward situation between teacher and students, and also can stimulate students excitement with the material given. Teacher's positive humor may provoke students to give positive humor too. The observed teacher

confidence, they will not ask and answer the question about the topic discussed.

is quite humorous person. This was proven by the frequent teacher joked with the students during the teaching and learning process in class. This would avoid the tension that exists between teacher and students. Humor also can make the relationship between teacher and students better, so that the students do not feel awkward to communicate with teacher.

According to the data of classroom observation, the students showed their positive humor when performing role play in front of the class. They entertained the other students by using some jokes while role playing the story.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to find out the answer of the research question about how the teacher gives praise to the students and also the influence of praise toward students' engagement. The result of this study showed that the way teacher gave praise to the students is in line with the theory by Connolly *et al* (1995) about 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. The result of the

study also showed students' positive engagement after being praised by the teacher. According to Jones (2009) there are five characteristics of students' engagement that can be examined using direct observation: positive body language, consistent focus, verbal participation, students' confidence, and fun and excitement.

In conclusion, the results of this study showed that the use of praise would influence students' positive engagement if it was given properly. Therefore, this study provides some suggestion that might be useful for teachers in increasing students' engagement. The teachers are suggested to choose, develop, or may be create the praise that are considered could provide the effective learning and match with the students' interest in order to motivate the students to actively contribute in the teaching learning process. Besides, the teachers are suggested to have a good preparation before implementing the technique in the classroom. A good preparation from the teachers also influences the success of teaching learning process.

This study also provides some suggestion for further study in the same field with this study. The further researchers may choose the same topic as this study with different level such as senior high school or even elementary school level. It is also suggested to choose another type of reward, in order to compare with this technique. So, the further study could be more convincing and those suggested aids can be useful to be used in increasing the students' engagement. The further researchers also suggested to give a questionnaire or to conduct an interview to the teacher as the additional data.

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