



Skipper, Y. and Douglas, K. (2012) Is no praise good praise? Effects of positive feedback on children's and university students' responses to subsequent failures. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 82(2), pp. 327-339.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article Skipper, Y. and Douglas, K. (2012) Is no praise good praise? Effects of positive feedback on children's and university students' responses to subsequent failures. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 82(2), pp. 327-339, which has been published in final form at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8279.2011.02028.x>. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with [Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving](#).

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/185739/>

Deposited on: 2 May 2019

Is no praise good praise? Effects of positive feedback on children's and university students' responses to subsequent failures

Yvonne Skipper* and Karen Douglas

School of Psychology, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

**Correspondence should be addressed to Yvonne Skipper, School of Psychology, Keele University, Keele, Staffordshire, ST5 5BG, UK (e-mail: y.skipper@keele.ac.uk).*

British Journal of Educational Psychology (2012), 82, 327–339. DOI:10.1111/j.2044-8279.2011.02028.x

Background. According to Dweck and colleagues, praise can be delivered using person ('you are clever') or process terms ('you worked hard'). Research suggests that giving people process praise after success can help them deal better with subsequent failures because it attributes outcomes to effort rather than fixed ability. However, research has thus far inadequately addressed how these types of praise compare to receiving no evaluative feedback.

Aim. The aim of the present research was to examine the effects of person and process praise compared to a control group where only objective outcome feedback was given.

Samples. In Study 1, 145 British school children aged 9–11 years took part. In Study 2, participants were 114 British university students.

Method. In both studies, participants read three scenarios and were asked to imagine themselves as the main character. In each scenario, they succeeded in an educational task and received either person, process, or no praise. Participants then read two scenarios, where they failed at a task. Following each scenario participants evaluated their performance, affect, and persistence.

Results. After one failure, participants who received person praise reacted most negatively on all dependent measures. However, those in the process condition did not differ significantly from those in the control group.

Conclusions. These findings suggest that process feedback may not be inherently positive; instead person feedback seems particularly detrimental.

Research has shown that feedback is one of the top ten influences on learning (Hattie, 2009). However, different forms of feedback can have strikingly different consequences. For example, following a meta-analysis of 131 studies, Kluger and DeNisi (1996) found wide variability in the effects of feedback, with some types of feedback having a positive influence on learning, some having a negative influence, and some having no influence at all. In part, this is because feedback can be delivered on a number of different levels.

Specifically, feedback can be related to the *task*, involving basic performance feedback about correctness or incorrectness; the *process*, providing information on how the task was completed; *self-regulation* with the aim to make the learner more aware of learning processes; and finally, the *self*, including direct praise and criticism of the learner, often directing attention away from the task, processes, or self-regulation (Hattie, 2009, in press).

This final level of feedback – specifically praise – is of particular interest in the current research. The importance of studying praise in educational contexts is underscored by Hyland and Hyland (2001) who noted that almost half of the feedback delivered by teachers is praise. However, learners' responses to praise have also been found to be mixed. In some studies, praise has led to improved performance (O'Leary & O'Leary, 1977), in others debilitated performance (Mueller & Dweck, 1998), and in some, it has had no effect (Beaman & Wheldall, 2000). The contribution of praise to educational outcomes is therefore not completely clear. In particular, it is important to understand how different types of praise following successes can elicit positive and negative responses to educational challenges.

Effects of praise

Researchers have identified two different patterns of reactions to educational challenges, and in particular to setbacks. First, people can display a *helpless* response, where they attribute failure to a lack of ability and display lowered affect and persistence. In contrast, people can display a *mastery-oriented* pattern, where they focus on their effort when faced with difficulty and instead maintain their level of affect and persistence (Ames & Archer, 1981; Diener & Dweck, 1978, 1980; Dweck, 1999; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Weiner, 1985). Whether people display an adaptive or maladaptive coping pattern has been shown to be largely dependent on feedback (e.g., Dweck, 1999; Henderlong & Lepper, 2002; Henderlong Corpus & Lepper, 2007; Kamins & Dweck, 1999). Specifically, how people are praised for their successes affects how they deal with later setbacks, influencing perceptions of performance, general affect, and motivation to engage in future tasks (Henderson & Dweck, 1990; Heyman, Dweck, & Cain, 1992; Heyman & Dweck, 1998; Kamins & Dweck, 1999).

In an influential body of research, Dweck and colleagues have argued that praise can be distinguished between comments that are aimed at evaluating a person's traits or the person as a whole (e.g., 'You are a clever girl') and comments that focus on the person's effort or strategies (e.g., 'You found a good way to do it'; Dweck, 1999; Kamins & Dweck, 1999). Kamins and Dweck (1999) showed that praising a child in *person* terms after they succeed leads to helpless responses to subsequent failures more than when the feedback relates to the concrete *process* through which the success was reached. They argued that person praise leads children to interpret their achievements in trait terms and encourages a fixed mindset of success, more so than process praise that focuses more on effort and behaviour. Following person praise, failures may signal that outcomes are due to poor ability or negative traits such as a lack of intelligence or creativity, thus undermining performance evaluations, affect, motivation, and leading to a helpless response.

Extending these findings, Cimpian, Arce, Markman and Dweck (2007) found that evenly matched statements either worded in person (e.g., 'You are a good drawer') or process terms (e.g., 'You did a good job drawing') had similar effects. Here, children dealt poorly with their later failures after being praised in person terms – they were more likely to denigrate their skills, feel unhappy, avoid repairing their mistakes, and quit the task altogether. In contrast, children who were told that they had done a good job showed better strategies for correcting their mistakes and persisting with the task. Similar results were revealed for the communication of criticism. In particular, Kamins and Dweck (1999) demonstrated that person criticism, in contrast to process criticism, led to helpless responses. In general, children in groups who received person feedback were more likely to feel bad, show lowered motivation, and were less likely to persist with their tasks than those in the process feedback groups. In fact, children in the person feedback groups also more strongly endorsed the belief that 'badness' is stable over time and that it can be diagnosed from one failure. Kamins and Dweck argued that person feedback can therefore foster a sense of

contingent self-worth – where children only see themselves as valued when they are successful – and thus create a helpless pattern of responses to failures (see also Burhans & Dweck, 1995).

These findings are striking because the differences in the wording of the feedback are generally so small that the person giving the feedback may not even notice the difference. Further, even if teachers do notice the difference, they may not be aware that the different forms of feedback have contrasting implications. They may therefore be likely to use these contrasting forms of feedback interchangeably with potentially negative consequences for learners' motivation, self-esteem, and persistence. So, in the long term, person-related feedback on a learner's educational performance, however positively intended, may yield unfavourable outcomes. These outcomes may persist beyond childhood and even through to higher education. Based on these findings, it is therefore unsurprising that the education sector strongly promotes process-related praise (rather than person-related) in interventions to improve students' performance (Rathvon, 2008).

However, despite all we know about the positive effects of process compared to person-related feedback, a surprising gap exists in the current literature. Specifically, to date, it is unclear whether person praise predicts worse outcomes after failure, or if process praise predicts better outcomes, than receiving *objective performance feedback* alone such as a grade or a mark. Much of the literature has focused on the comparisons between person and process praise, but it is as yet unknown if or how educational outcomes following one of these types of praise are different to outcomes following objective feedback about one's performance. Hattie and Timperley (2007) argued that such objective feedback (e.g., 'You got 5/5') may be sufficient to predict positive learning outcomes and certain types of praise may even dilute the effectiveness of performance feedback. If indeed objective performance feedback is as effective as process feedback, this may have important implications for the delivery of feedback in educational settings. The strategic use of positive reinforcement is a central feature of most school-based behavioural interventions (Kazdin, 1982; Martens, Witt, Daly, & Vollmer, 1999). Indeed, teachers are encouraged to use praise to motivate children. However, if process praise adds little to objective information, such as the information provided by a grade or mark, then perhaps it is not necessary to encourage educational practitioners to use this type of feedback.

Control group

We argue that this important question can be examined by the use of a control group. In previous research, there has been some debate as to what constitutes a control group when comparing the effects of different types of feedback, making it difficult to draw clear conclusions. Control groups vary from students being told 'That's a really high score' (Kamins & Dweck, 1999) to students being ignored (Anderson, Manoogian, & Reznick, 1976) with many levels in between. Thus, control groups vary widely and have led researchers to conflicting inferences. For example, it is un-surprising that Anderson *et al.* (1976) found that praise had a positive effect on learners. Children in a control group, who were ignored, understandably responded more negatively to their successes and failures than children who had received feedback and therefore attention. In Kamins and Dweck's (1999) work, children in the control group who were told 'That's a really high score' did not respond as positively to failure as children who had received process praise. Children in the control condition did, however, respond better than those who had received person praise. This led Kamins and Dweck to infer that process praise led to positive outcomes for learners and person praise to negative outcomes. However, in their study, the control group received positive feedback, which could be viewed as a different type of praise. Therefore, this control group might not provide a good baseline. A stronger control group is important as it makes it possible to infer whether process praise is really beneficial or person praise is truly damaging.

Finally, it is important to examine the extent to which any effects of praise last over time. Specifically, previous work has demonstrated that process praise, compared to person praise, has a positive influence on responses to a single failure. Often measures of performance, affect, and persistence are only taken following one failure (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Kamins and Dweck (1999) argued that while one failure may be viewed as unlucky or caused by chance and therefore ignored, two failures may be viewed more seriously. It is therefore possible that praise may buffer learners against a helpless response to a single failure due to the fact that single failures are easier to ignore. However, it may be that repeated failure in itself is viewed as more serious, leading to a helpless response.

The current research

In this paper, we report the results of two experiments examining the effects of person- and process-related praise on how people deal with subsequent failures. Specifically, we examine the effects of praise on learners' perceptions of their performance, affect, and level of persistence. While we acknowledge that praise may influence other outcomes, such as self-esteem, these three outcomes were chosen as they examine vital aspects of the mastery and helpless responses to failure as investigated in previous research (Ames & Archer, 1981; Diener & Dweck, 1978, 1980; Dweck, 1999; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Weiner, 1985).

The first experiment is an investigation with school children aged 9–11 as participants. In the second study, we gathered responses from a university student sample. In each experiment, participants were asked to read and imagine themselves in three scenarios, each depicting an educational accomplishment. Following each success scenario, participants were given objective performance feedback (e.g., 'You got 5 out of 5 correct'), followed by either person (e.g., 'You are clever'), or process praise (e.g., 'You found a good way to do it'). Crucially, however, we also included a control condition where only the objective performance feedback was given and children received no verbal praise. After reading these scenarios, participants were asked to record their perceived performance, affect, and the extent to which they would like to persist with the task. Participants were then asked to read and imagine themselves in two more scenarios, both depicting an educational failure such as failing a test (e.g., 'You only got 3/10'). Following these scenarios participants received no verbal feedback. After each scenario, participants were asked again to record their perceived performance, affect, and persistence. In line with previous research (Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998), we predicted that, after successes, participants would report high levels of perceived performance, affect, and persistence, regardless of the type of praise given. However, following failure, we predicted that participants who had received person praise would report lower levels of perceived performance, affect, and persistence than those who had received process praise or no praise. Including a control group allows us to examine clearly whether process praise elicits more positive outcomes than objective feedback, or if person praise is inherently detrimental. By including more than one failure scenario, we further examined the persistence of the effects of praise over time.

EXPERIMENT 1

Method

Participants and design

One hundred and forty five British school children ($M = 9$ years 8 months; 66 girls and 79 boys) participated in a short break from classroom activities. They were randomly divided into three experimental groups: person praise, process praise, and no praise. The dependent measures were perceived performance, affect, and persistence.

Materials and procedure

Children were given a questionnaire, where they were asked to imagine themselves as the child depicted in five written scenarios based on everyday school situations. For example, the following scenario presents a child performing a maths test:

'One day you were given some very difficult problems in maths. You had never done them before but you listened carefully to your teacher Mrs Billington as she explained how to do them. After showing the class some examples on the board she gave everyone five problems to practice on. You got out your calculator and started to do the sums. You found them quite hard but wanted to show Mrs Billington that you had listened carefully to her and that you could do the problems well. You worked very hard on the problems, taking your time and thinking very carefully so as not to make any mistakes. When you got your work back, you saw that you got all 5 out of 5 correct'.

The first three scenarios described successes, followed by objective performance feedback as shown in the example (e.g., 'You got all 5 out of 5 correct'), and after each scenario, children received person (e.g., 'You're really good at Maths'), process (e.g., 'You worked really hard at this'), or no praise depending on the experimental condition. The final two scenarios depicted failures (e.g., 'You only got 3 out of 10 correct'), and following these, children received no verbal feedback. The basic procedure is presented in Table 1. The order of scenarios was fully counterbalanced.

Table 1. Example of experimental procedure (Experiment 1)

Person	Process	Control
Success		
Geography: person praise	Geography: process praise	Geography: no praise
Maths: person praise	Maths: process praise	Maths: no praise
English: person praise	English: process praise	English: no praise
Failure		
Science: no praise	Science: no praise	Science: no praise
French: no praise	French: no praise	French: no praise

After each scenario, children answered three questions on a five-point ‘smiley-face’ scale, ranging from a frown for a negative response, up to a smile for a positive response (questions for the maths example):

- (1) How well did you do in your maths test? (*perceived performance*)
- (2) How did your performance in your maths test make you feel? (*affect*)
- (3) Would you like to do another maths test? (*persistence*)

After completing the measures, the children were thanked and de-briefed.

Results

Results are presented in Table 2. We compared children’s perceived performance, affect, and persistence across the three successes and found that responses on all dependent measures were consistently positive across the scenarios. As expected, there were no significant differences between the person, process, and control conditions after the successes.

Table 2. Effects of praise on children’s responses to success and failure (Experiment 1)

	Person		Process		Control	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Average success						
Performance	4.33	.77	4.00	.96	3.93	.99
Affect	3.92	.58	3.82	.88	3.91	.66
Persistence	2.82	1.26	2.72	1.07	2.88	1.11
Failure 1						
Performance	2.08	1.05	2.65	1.33	2.54	1.16
Affect	2.08	1.13	2.78	1.34	2.68	1.19
Persistence	1.95	1.40	2.78	1.60	2.28	1.33
Failure 2						
Performance	2.26	1.00	2.37	1.24	2.68	1.02
Affect	2.22	1.19	2.43	1.26	2.68	1.02
Persistence	2.17	1.27	2.22	1.28	2.20	1.34

Effects of positive feedback 333

After one failure, however, children showed differences in all dependent measures across the person, process, and control conditions [perceived performance: $F(2, 142) = 2.98, p = .054, \eta^2 = 0.04$; affect: $F(2, 142) = 4.37, p = .014, \eta^2 = 0.06$; persistence: $F(2, 142) = 3.89, p = .023, \eta^2 = 0.05$). Because children in the person praise condition were expected to show the most negative response to failure, we then conducted a planned

comparison analysis, comparing children in the person condition (-2) to those in both the process (1) and control (1) conditions. Results from this analysis revealed that indeed, students in the person condition rated lowest on all DVs [perceived performance: $t(142) = 2.39, p = .018, d = 0.40$; affect: $t(142) = 2.93, p = .004, d = 0.49$; and persistence: $t(142) = 2.22, p = .028, d = 0.37$]. Therefore, children in the person praise condition showed a more negative response to a single failure than those who received process or no praise. Crucially, however, there were no differences between the process and control conditions for any of the measures [perceived performance: $F(1, 97) = 0.20, p = .654, \eta^2 = 0.002$; affect: $F(1, 97) = 0.14, p = .710, \eta^2 = 0.001$; persistence: $F(1, 97) = 2.825, p = .096, \eta^2 = 0.02$]. Therefore, consistent with earlier findings, praising a child's success in person terms led to helpless responses to failure more than when the feedback was given in process terms (Kamins & Dweck, 1999). However, results suggest that the positive effects of process praise may contribute little more than objective performance feedback (cf. Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Further, results demonstrated that perceived performance: $t(144) = 36.58, p < .001, d = 1.42$; affect: $t(144) = 40.18, p < .001, d = 1.23$; and persistence: $t(144) = 19.75, p < .001, d = 0.36$ predictably decreased overall after one failure. Despite the effects of the different types of praise after one failure, perceived performance, $F(2, 142) = 1.94, p = .148, \eta^2 = 0.03$, affect, $F(2, 142) = 1.92, p = .150, \eta^2 = 0.03$, and persistence: $F(2, 142) = 0.02, p = .92, \eta^2 < 0.001$, were not enhanced by process or objective performance feedback once the children had experienced their second failure. All children showed negative responses irrespective of the type of praise they had received in the first phase of the experiment. This suggests that process praise and objective feedback may buffer a child against one failure, but that after a second failure, more negative responses occur irrespective of feedback.

To replicate and extend these findings, we conducted a second experiment with a sample of university undergraduate students. To date, very few studies have examined how university students deal with different types of feedback on their performance (Barker, 1992; Good, 1987; Hancock, 2000). Those that have been carried out with older students show similar effects to those in younger children – specifically, process praise elicits more positive outcomes than person praise. We therefore expect similar results amongst university students to those obtained in the sample of school children. Therefore, in Experiment 2, university students participated in a conceptually similar experiment to the school children in Experiment 1, with the scenarios slightly adapted to suit the university setting.

EXPERIMENT 2

Method

Participants and design

One hundred and fourteen British social science undergraduates (age $M = 21$ years, 6 months; 74 females and 39 males) took part on a voluntary basis. They were randomly divided into three experimental groups as in Experiment 1: person praise, process praise, and no praise. Again, the dependent measures were perceived performance, affect, and persistence.

Materials and procedure

The students were given a questionnaire where, as in Experiment 1, they were asked to imagine themselves as the student depicted in five written scenarios based on everyday educational situations. Again, the first three scenarios described successes and the students received objective performance feedback (e.g., 'You saw that you had got 80%'). Following each scenario, students received person (e.g., 'You are a strong student'), process (e.g., 'You worked hard at this'), or no praise, depending on the condition. The scenarios and feedback were written to be consistent with the wording given to children in Experiment 1, but each case was slightly modified to be valid for adult participants. Again, the final two scenarios depicted failures (e.g., 'You saw that you had only got 40%'), and following these, students received no verbal feedback. After each scenario, the students answered the same three questions as the children, regarding perceived performance, affect, and persistence on a five-point scale ranging from 1 for a negative response up to 5 for a positive response. After completing the measures, the participants were thanked and de-briefed.

Results and discussion

Results are presented in Table 3. As in Experiment 1, we compared the students' perceived performance, affect, and persistence across the three successes. Again, we found that responses on all dependent measures were consistently positive across the scenarios. As expected, there were no significant differences between the person, praise, and control conditions after the success trials.

Table 3. Effects of praise on students' responses to success and failure (Experiment 2).

	Person		Process		Control	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Average success						
Performance	5.18	.59	5.38	.64	5.46	.68
Affect	5.18	.59	5.30	.69	5.46	.64
Persistence	3.61	1.11	3.96	1.11	3.50	1.27
Failure 1						
Performance	1.70	.85	2.62	1.18	2.31	.86
Affect	1.70	.85	2.28	1.21	2.17	.85
Persistence	3.35	1.66	3.10	1.80	3.57	1.68
Failure 2						
Performance	1.90	.81	1.89	1.21	1.97	.90
Affect	1.78	.77	1.90	1.25	1.97	.84
Persistence	3.43	1.68	3.00	1.86	3.17	1.66

After one failure, however, students showed a similar pattern to the school children with differences in perceived performance and affect across conditions [perceived performance: $F(2, 112) = 8.94, p < .001, 2 = 0.14$; affect: $F(2, 112) = 3.84, p = 0.02, 2 = 0.064$; see Table 2). However, contrary to Experiment 1, university students' levels of persistence were not affected by the type of feedback they had received [$F(2, 112) = .66, p = .521, 2 = .01$]. Again, we expected that children in the person condition would show the most negative response to failure, so we compared students in this condition (-2) to those in both the process (1) and control (1) conditions.

Results revealed that indeed, students in the person condition rated lowest on perceived performance: $t(112) = 3.97, p < .001, d = 0.75$ and affect: $t(112) = 2.71, p = .008, d = 0.51$. Crucially, however, there were no differences between the process and control conditions for any of the measures [perceived performance: $F(1, 73) = 1.66, p = .201, 2 = 0.022$; affect: $F(1, 73) = 0.23, p = .637, 2 = 0.003$; persistence: $F(1, 73) = 1.26, p = .265, 2 = 0.02$]. This replicates findings from Experiment 1 and suggests that, as for children, while praising university students in process terms provides more favourable outcomes than person praise, the positive effects of process praise may contribute little more than objective performance feedback.

Further, as in Experiment 1, perceived performance: $t(114) = 3.20, p = .002, d = 0.278$ and affect: $t(114) = 2.33, p = .022, d = 0.162$, predictably decreased overall after one failure. Again, despite the effects of the different types of praise after one failure, perceived performance, $F(2, 112) = 0.068, p = .934, 2 = 0.001$, and affect, $F(2, 112) = .395, p = .675, 2 = 0.007$, were not enhanced by process or objective performance feedback once the students experienced a second failure. Again, after a second failure all students showed more negative responses irrespective of the type of praise they had received in the first phase of the study.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our results suggest that, consistent with earlier findings, when learners are succeeding, they respond equally positively to person, process, and no praise. Participants in both studies were pleased with their performance, showed positive affect, and showed intentions to persist. However, we found differences between the feedback conditions when they began to fail. Specifically, praising successes in person terms led to negative responses to failure more than when the feedback was given in process terms, again replicating previous work (Kamins & Dweck, 1999). Thus, following a single failure, those who received person praise showed less positive responses than those

who received process praise. However, our results uniquely suggest that the positive effects of process praise may contribute little more than objective performance feedback.

According to Dweck (2006), process praise leads to a mastery response because it encourages learners to adopt a growth mindset, in which they cultivate their abilities and learn through application. However, our findings suggest that objective feedback on performance may be sufficient to encourage this growth mindset in comparison to person praise. Process praise may not necessarily contribute more to encourage this mindset. Instead, person-related praise appears to be particularly detrimental. When delivering feedback, teachers may therefore be advised to avoid comments that are worded in person terms and instead opt for process-related feedback but may not necessarily need to go out of their way to provide evaluative comments on a learner's performance. A simple '10 out of 10' may be enough to encourage a positive response in the face of a subsequent failure. Our findings therefore suggest that objective feedback can have equally positive educational outcomes as praise that is worded in terms of effort. However, this positive effect may be limited to the measures included in this study (perceived performance, affect, and persistence), and it may be that praise has more positive influences on other variables such as self-esteem. Therefore, future research may explore the underlying psychological processes that make objective feedback as effective as process-related feedback on alternative dependent measures.

Future research should also examine the long-term effects of the different types of feedback. Much of the research to date (e.g., Dweck, 1999; Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998) has focused on discrete, singular events or a small handful of events on which to judge outcomes. However, learners are often required to cope with repeated failures. As we have shown here, after more than one failure participants tended to show more negative responses regardless of the feedback they received after their successes. Pessimistically, it is possible that repeated failure is enough to lead people to make attributions about their abilities. On the other hand, it is possible that subtle linguistic feedback offers the key to preventing this helpless response. Specifically, no research to our knowledge has tested the utility of feedback intended to 'repair' the responses of learners who are struggling to cope with failure. It is likely that process-related feedback, focusing on the processes underlying the negative events, would help buffer learners against the effects of persistent failures.

It is entirely plausible too that subtle linguistic feedback can have longer term effects than are currently known or are able to be seen with current research methodologies. For instance, if a learner is constantly referred to in trait terms, then this may have significant and lasting consequences following failure that may not be evident based on observations from single feedback events. Future research may therefore examine the effects of continued and persistent person and process feedback on performance, affect, and persistence. Further, repeated use of trait terms may signal bias or a specific motive on the part of the feedback-giver that may not necessarily be the case for single feedback episodes (cf. Douglas & Sutton, 2006, 2010). Given the importance of feedback being a fair and accurate representation of a learner's performance (Hattie, in press), the effects of subtle linguistic feedback should be investigated as they occur in real settings rather than isolated experimental examples.

Research on educational feedback may also benefit from considering other subtle linguistic variations in feedback. For example, 'You wrote that story well' and 'You are a good writer' lie at the two poles of the linguistic category model as proposed by Semin and Fiedler (1988; see also Wigboldus & Douglas, 2007). To date, researchers have not examined the different effects of delivering feedback in the form of other linguistic categories such as interpretative action verbs (e.g., 'you arranged that story well') or state verbs (e.g., 'you like writing'). It is possible that positive and negative outcomes only occur when researchers contrast the extreme adjectives and discrete verbs, or it may be the case that feedback has less positive outcomes as it becomes more abstract or person-related along a continuum. Other forms of verbs may also enable students and teachers to infer goals and motives of feedback-givers (Douglas & Sutton, 2006, 2010). Future research may therefore examine different linguistic variations in feedback as they are used and interpreted in educational settings.

There may also be ways to combine these possibilities for future research with more general concerns about the linguistic framing of educational feedback. First, the way that a person deals with feedback may also depend on their pre-existing understanding of intelligence and ability. Dweck and colleagues have argued that there are two general ways in which people understand intelligence and ability. First, *entity theorists* believe that intelligence is like a trait – people have a certain amount of intelligence and it cannot be changed (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). In contrast, *incremental theorists* believe that intelligence is something that can be cultivated through learning. This does not mean that people holding this theory deny individual differences in knowledge and how quickly people learn – it simply means that they believe everyone, with effort, can increase their intellectual abilities (Mueller & Dweck,

1998). As such, to a person holding an incremental theory, effort is viewed positively because it means that they are stretching their abilities and learning new things. It may therefore be the case that process-related praise is more effective for people who hold an incremental theory of intelligence. In contrast, for a person holding an entity theory, effort illustrates poor ability and as such is damaging to the self-concept. From this perspective, if a person is intelligent, then they should not need to try hard. It may therefore be the case that person-related feedback is more effective on people holding an entity theory of intelligence than those who hold an incremental theory. Future research could disentangle these possibilities and examine the likelihood that subtle linguistic feedback is best 'tailored' to learners' existing theory of intelligence. The extent to which theories of intelligence are malleable may also play a part in the tailoring of feedback.

In sum, subtle differences in the wording of praise can influence people's interpretation of their abilities, traits, and motivations. Giving the most objective form of performance feedback may be sufficient to make learners feel positive, but after more than one failure, they appear to display more negative responses regardless of how they were praised for their successes. This suggests that the effects of feedback may be more transitory than previously expected. It also suggests the need for further research examining how educational practitioners can encourage a mastery response in the face of repeated failure.

Acknowledgements

We thank the children, teachers, and parents of Hampton Primary School, Herne Bay. We also thank Robbie Sutton for helpful comments on this paper.

References

- Ames, C., & Archer, J. (1981). Competitive versus individualistic goal structures: The salience of past performance information for causal attributions and affect. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 73*, 414–418. doi:10.1037/0022-0663.73.3.411
- Anderson, R., Manoogian, S. T., & Reznick, J. S. (1976). The undermining and enhancing of intrinsic motivation in pre school children. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 34*, 915–922. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.34.5.915
- Barker, K. (1992). Workshop summary: The many faces of motivation in the learning process. *Aspects of Educational and Training Technology Series, 25*, 39–41. doi:10.1080/00131880110107379
- Beaman, R., & Wheldall, K. (2000). Teachers' use of approval and disapproval in the classroom. *Educational Psychology, 20*, 431–446. doi:10.1080/713663753
- Burhans, K. K., & Dweck, C. S. (1995). Helplessness in early childhood: The role of contingent worth. *Child Development, 66*, 1719–1738. doi:10.2307/1131906
- Cimpian, A., Arce, H. M. C., Markman, E. M., & Dweck, C. S. (2007). Subtle linguistic cues affect children's motivation. *Psychological Science, 18*, 314–316. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01896.x
- Diener, C. I., & Dweck, C. S. (1978). An analysis of learned helplessness: Continuous changes in performance, strategy, and achievement cognitions following failure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 36*, 451–462. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.36.5.451
- Diener, C. I., & Dweck, C. S. (1980). An analysis of learned helplessness II: The processing of success. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 39*, 940–952. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.39.5.940
- Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2006). When what you say about others says something about you. Language abstraction and inferences about describers' attitudes and goals. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 42*, 500–508. doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2005.06.001
- Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2010). By their words ye shall know them: Language abstraction and the likeability of describers. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 40*, 366–374. doi:10.1002/ejsp.634
- Dweck, C. S. (1999). *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality and development*. Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press.
- Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Random House.
- Dweck, C. S., & Leggett, E. L. (1988). A social-cognitive approach to motivation and personality. *Psychological Review, 95*, 256–272. doi:10.1037/0033-295X.95.2.256
- Good, T. (1987). Two decades of research on teacher expectations: Findings and future directions. *Journal of Teacher Education, 37*, 32–47. doi:10.1177/002248718703800406
- Hancock, D. R. (2000). Impact of verbal praise on college students' time spent on homework. *Journal of Educational Research, 93*, 384–389. doi:10.1080/00220670009598733
- Hattie, J. A. C. (in press). Feedback in schools. In R. Sutton, M. Hornsey, & K. Douglas (Eds.), *Feedback: The communication of praise, criticism and advice*. New York: Peter Lang Publishers.

- Hattie, J. A. C. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of 800 + meta-analyses on achievement*. Oxford, UK: Routledge.
- Hattie, J. A. C., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77, 81–112. doi:10.3102/003465430298487
- Henderlong, J., & Lepper, M. R. (2002). The effects of praise on children's intrinsic motivation: A review and synthesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 128, 774–795. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.128.5. 774
- Henderlong Corpus, J., & Lepper, M. R. (2007). The effects of person versus performance praise on children's motivation: Gender and age as moderating factors. *Educational Psychology*, 27, 487–508. doi:10.1080/01443410601159852
- Henderson, V., & Dweck, C. S. (1990). Achievement and motivation in adolescence. A new model and data. In S. F. G. Elliot (Ed.), *At the threshold: The developing adolescent* (pp. 308–329). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Heyman, G. D., & Dweck, C. S. (1998). Children's thinking about traits: Implications for judgments of the self and others. *Child Development*, 69, 392–403. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.1998.tb06197.x
- Heyman, G., Dweck, C. S., & Cain, K. M. (1992). Young children's vulnerability to self-blame and helplessness: Relationship to beliefs about goodness. *Child Development*, 63, 401–415.
- Hyland, F., & Hyland, K. (2001). Sugaring the pill: Praise and criticism in written feedback. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 10, 185–212. doi:10.2307/1131488
- Kamins, M. L., & Dweck, C. S. (1999). Person versus process praise and criticism: Implications for contingent self-worth and coping. *Developmental Psychology*, 35, 835–847. doi:10.1016/S1060-3743(01)00038-8
- Kazdin, A. E. (1982). Applying behavioral principles in the schools. In C. R. Reynolds & T. B. Gutkin (Eds.), *Handbook of school psychology* (pp. 501–529). New York: Wiley.
- Kluger, A. N., & DeNisi, A. (1996). The effects of feedback interventions on performance: A historical review, a meta-analysis, and a preliminary feedback intervention theory. *Psychological Bulletin*, 119, 254–284. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.119.2.254
- Martens, B. K., Witt, J. C., Daly, E. J., & Vollmer, T. (1999). Behavior analysis: Theory and practice in educational settings. In C. R. Reynolds & T. B. Gutkin (Eds.), *Handbook of school psychology* (3rd ed., pp. 638–663) New York: Wiley.
- Mueller, C. M., & Dweck, C. S. (1998). Praise for intelligence can undermine children's motivation and performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75, 33–52. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.75.1.33
- O'Leary, K. D., & O'Leary, S. G. (1977). *Classroom management: The successful use of behavior modification* (2nd ed.). New York: Pergamon Press.
- Rathvon, N. (2008). *Effective school interventions*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Semin, G. R., & Fiedler, K. (1988). The cognitive functions of linguistic categories in describing persons: Social cognition and language. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54, 558–568. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.54.4.558
- Weiner, B. (1985). An attributional theory of achievement motivation and emotion. *Psychological Review*, 92, 548–573. doi:10.1037/0033-295X.92.4.548
- Wigboldus, D., & Douglas, K. M. (2007). Language, stereotypes, and intergroup relations. In K. Fiedler (Ed.), *Social communication* (pp. 79–106). New York: Psychology Press.