'Very good' as a teacher response

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Much scholarly and pedagogical attention has been devoted to corrective feedback. In this paper, we turn to positive feedback, and in particular, call for a reconsideration of teachers' use of explicit positive assessments such as 'very good'. Based on examples from an ESL classroom, we show that utterances such as 'very good' may have the potential of inhibiting learning opportunities within particular pedagogical contexts. We then broaden our discussion by offering a range of suggestions for managing the complexities of positive feedback in the language classroom.

Introduction

An integral part of language teaching is giving feedback. As Fanselow (1987: 267) writes, 'to teach is to provide feedback'. Over the past three decades, we have made great strides in understanding the various facets and strategies of feedback in language teaching. Much of the scholarly inquiry, however, has been devoted to feedback giving when something goes wrong, i.e. negative or 'corrective' feedback (Gass and Mackey 2006). In this paper, we ask what kind of feedback teachers should give when nothing appears to be going wrong. What do we say when a student has just produced a correct response? To many, the answer may be obvious, uninteresting, or unimportant. We argue otherwise. To that end, we will first introduce some background on positive feedback and its related practice of 'praising'. We will then briefly show how the use of 'very good' may inhibit learning opportunities in a particular pedagogical context. Finally, we will offer some teaching suggestions on responding to correct student contributions in ways that possibly promote learning.

Background

In contrast to the large body of literature on corrective feedback, work on positive feedback is difficult to find. Allwright (1980) categorizes positive feedback such as 'fine' or 'good' as part of the 'quality judgements' integral to the guidance we give as teachers in the language classroom. Some empirical work on positive feedback has addressed how it is done. Based on data gathered from English language classrooms, Seedhouse (2004: 206–7) claims that positive evaluation is often implied in the absence of feedback in the initiation–response–feedback sequence (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975). By examining 25 hours of classroom discourse, Hellermann (2003: 88) shows that positive assessments done in teacher repetitions are characterized by:

1 rhythmical placement synchronized with student response,
2 falling pitch contour,

3 mid-level pitch,
4 longer duration than student responses.

Others have considered what positive feedback really accomplishes. According to Mehan (1979: 64), positive evaluation is a 'terminal act' that marks the final boundary of a sequence (cf. Schegloff 2007). Utterances like 'very good', for example, can merely signal that it is time to move on to the next person (Fanselow op. cit.) or the next activity ('transition ritual' in Brophy 1981: 18).

One function of utterances such as 'very good' is to praise—a way of reinforcing a student's giving of a correct response, which, in the context of language teaching, means reinforcing correct comprehension or production of a language structure, for example. Notably, the correctness of a student's response is not necessarily a key consideration in whether a teacher offers praise. Brophy (op. cit.) maintains that teachers sometimes offer inappropriate praise, lauding students for incorrect answers as well as correct ones. In citing O'Leary and O'Leary, Brophy (ibid.) indicates that three features must be present in order for praise to function as reinforcement. First, the praise must be *contingent* on the actual execution of the behaviour that is being reinforced. Second, the praise must be *specific* about the behaviour being reinforced. Third, the praise must be *sincere* and addressed to the particular context in question.

For example, one problem with the use of 'very good' in a second language teaching context, according to Fanselow (op. cit.), is that if a teacher uses the phrase 'very good' in response to a student's utterance, 'I extremely happy', to what does the teacher's praise refer? Fanselow (ibid.) argues that the precise target in this case may be ambiguous. It may be that the teacher is pleased that the student is happy, or the teacher may be overjoyed that the student has produced a response at all. Alternatively, it is conceivable that the teacher is only responding to the portion of the utterance that is correct, despite the fact that the utterance produced by the student is not fully accurate (Fanselow ibid.: 281).

Clearly, feedback giving, and in our case, positive feedback giving, is not a straightforward task. More experienced teachers, however, may be better equipped to manage its complexities. Forgas and Tehani (2005), for example, report that experienced feedback givers are mindful of the impact of mood on feedback and, accordingly, they give more positive and polite feedback when they are in a sad mood. They remain alert and compensate for their sad mood in giving proper feedback.

In sum, even a simple item like 'very good' has its many faces. A plethora of issues surround its use. The cases discussed below are used as a point of departure for rethinking how a language instructor should respond to students' correct answers or responses, at least, on some occasions like the ones displayed in the ensuing discussion.

Examples of 'very good' from the ESL classroom

While the role of assessment such as 'very good' in marking sequence closing has been noted before (Mehan op. cit.; Schegloff op. cit.), we would like to take a step further in suggesting that its use may in fact result in the

unintended effect of shutting down learning opportunities by signalling not only sequence closing but also 'case closed'. In particular, we show a few instances of classroom data in a form-focused check-homework context, where the focus is on checking learners' ability to use 'present perfect' or 'present perfect progressive'. The brief analysis given below is derived from a more detailed conversation analytic treatment of a much larger amount of relevant data (see Waring 2008). The transcripts presented below have been simplified for readability. The only notation unfamiliar to the reader may be the two sets of vertically aligned brackets, which indicate simultaneous talk or overlapping non-verbal conduct (indicated in double parentheses) by different participants.

In the first instance, the relevant exercise item is:

Wow, I didn't know you were married.

How long _____?

(Purpura and Pinkley 2000: 73)

In Extract 1a below, Miyuki raises a question regarding this item:

Extract 1a			
	1	Miyuki	I have one [ques]tion,
	2	Teacher	[Yes.]
	3	Miyuki	Number three is if without 'be' is not good?
	4	Teacher	How long you've been marrie[d?
	5	Miyuki	[Have you married.
	6		have you married.

This sequence spans 75 lines of the transcript and lasts two and a half minutes. It turns out to be the most complicated error correction sequence in the two-hour class. Briefly, Miyuki has treated 'marry' as a verb, in which case its correct present perfect form would be 'have married', except that the punctual aspect of 'marry' is ill-fitted to the duration query of 'how long' (that is 'marry', like 'find' or 'explode' and unlike 'sleep' or 'work' are verbs that entail no duration). Since the form of 'married' may be either a verb or an adjective, Miyuki's confusion is not surprising. One wonders, however, why Miyuki did not raise her concern much earlier when the 'married' item was first being dealt with. Here is what happened four exercise items and 66 lines of transcript earlier:

Extract 1b			
	1	Teacher	Number three. Kevin.
	2	Kevin	'Wow. I didn't know you were married'.
	3		'How long have you [been married'.]
	4	Teacher	[((encouraging nods))]
	5		((emphatically)) Very good. How long have you been
	6		married. ((smiley voice)) Very good. Number four.
	7		Mai,

Note that from line 4 onward, the teacher's 'very good' is delivered immediately and emphatically, along with the encouraging nods, the smiley voice, a repetition of the response as well as a second 'very good'. Aside from the fact that her turn components emerge one after another without leaving any space for others to come in, this dramatic combination of verbal and non-verbal expressions not only accepts Kevin's response as correct but also puts it on a pedestal, so to speak. One might argue that against the backdrop of this finale-like, heavily advertised 'perfect' answer, any attempt to articulate understanding problems or explore alternative answers, as in Miyuki's case, would appear less than expected or desirable.

In the next segment, we see that the 'case-closed' quality of 'good!' is so strong that even when the teacher offers more space for learner contribution immediately thereafter, no uptake emerges. The relevant exercise item is this:

In fact the team (5) (won) _____ 98% of the games they (6) (play) _____ so far.

(Purpura and Pinkley op.cit.: 32)

Extract 2a	1	Teacher	Okay? Who's next? I think Jae? Is that you?
	2		Are you next? Alright.
	3	Jae	((reads)) 'In fact, the team has won uh
	4		ninety eight percent of the games'.
	5		((pause))
	6	Teacher	((th[ree consecutive nods))]
	7	Jae	[they have played so far.]
	8	Teacher	Good! ((in excited tone)). In fact the team has won
	9		ninety eight percent of the games ((in staccato
	10		tempo)) they ((pause)) have ((pause))
	11		pl[ayed] [so]
	12	Students	[played]
	13	Student	[so far.]
	14	Students	far.
	15		((T walks around))
	16	Teacher	Is everybody okay?
	17		((Ss writing))
	18		Yes? Okay ((reads instructions for next exercise))

Note that the teacher's 'Good!'-initiated response turn in lines 8–11 has many of the finale-like qualities as those seen in the previous case. The delivery of the repetition is notable. The staccato delivery of 'they have played so' exhibits a fairly typical teacher-like tone in imparting information

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that is important, salient, and worthy of remembering. It serves to establish the singular, irrefutable correctness of Jae's response, thus implicitly proposing that the case is now closed.

Despite this finale-like interactional state, in the ensuing space, the teacher displays no urgency to move on. The long gap during which she walks around provides an opportunity for learners to ask questions about the two just-completed verb forms—'win' and 'play'. The subsequent 'Is everybody okay?' makes available another window of opportunity. Yet, no questions are raised; all seems well. That is, until 418 lines of transcript and ten items later:

Extract 2b

1	Marie	number five uh 'the team has very good players'. In
2		fact, the team is winning or
3	Teacher	has won.

Clearly, Marie has not fully grasped what the correct answer is or why it is correct as opposed to any alternatives, and the earlier 'very good' closing did not seem to present a favourable environment for voicing her understanding problems.

There is, of course, always the issue of whether Miyuki or Marie had any concerns to voice earlier on in the first place. One might argue, for example, that their questions emerged over time. Since we are not privy to what was going on in their heads at the time, what we are proposing is that had there been a more 'inviting' space for student concerns when each item was initially dealt with, there might have been more room for those concerns to be developed and articulated, and that the uses of 'very good' in these particular contexts have not been conducive to creating that space.

In sum, there is some evidence that the use of 'very good' delivered in a particular tone and/or package may be inhibiting learning opportunities at least in a form-focused context. This outcome or by-product may be acute when the context is a language learning setting, one in which direct speaking opportunities in class and the frequency of them may contribute to and impact students' developing mastery of the target language. In what follows, we expand the discussion to the use of explicit positive assessments such as 'very good' in general and propose some suggestions for teaching.

Suggestions for the teacher

Given our overall discussion above, some teachers might ask, 'What are the alternatives for providing positive feedback other than using "very good"?' In this regard, we propose some ways of getting around a 'very good' dilemma. Our suggestions for what to do or say as alternative strategies are to be taken as preliminary steps in an understanding of what should go into the giving of positive feedback, when 'very good' appears to be not 'good' enough. We begin with specific classroom techniques and move on to a more general call for awareness, reflection, and action research.

Use 'very good' sparingly

Arguably, in some circumstances feedback tokens such as 'very good' should be used sparingly or even hardly at all especially with higher-level learners who may need less reinforcement or 'stroking' in the first place (Brophy op. cit.). In fact, learners typically assume that an answer given is

correct unless teachers tell students otherwise (Brophy ibid.; Seedhouse op. cit.). Herein might be a small time-saving mechanism, i.e. not offering positive feedback after every student response, particularly with more advanced learners.

Produce 'very good' with 'non-final' intonation	Teachers might say 'very good' using a mid-rising intonational contour, which has the effect of functioning as a continuer, soliciting 'more' or further responses from the students. In other words, utter 'very good' with accompanying appropriate non-verbal cues so that the feedback gives off a 'non-final' rather than a 'finale-like' tone.
Accept with less evaluative tokens	The teacher may accept the student's correct response with less evaluative tokens such as 'okay', 'alright', and the like. In fact, there is some evidence in Waring (op. cit.) that when 'okay' is used instead of 'very good', students may proceed to ask follow-up questions about the just-completed item.
Ask 'permission' to move on	The teacher may wish to give a simple, quick nod of the head up and down, which implies approval of the student's correct answer in a non-verbal manner and immediately follows up by saying 'Okay to move on?' If the original respondent to the item does not have any problems with moving on, then the teacher turns to the whole class and asks again 'Okay to move on?' Providing feedback in this manner is akin to 'opening up closings' which gives added interactional opportunity spaces, if needed, for anyone in the class to put forth 'unmentioned mentionables' (Schegloff and Sacks 1973). This technique may be important particularly for those students who are reticent to speak up and may need extra encouragement or interactional space in which to do so. In contrast, note that in Extract 2a above, the teacher's production of 'good' in an excited manner and her repetition of the correct student's answer with staccato tones and pauses served to close off further student questions even though she also asked 'Is everybody okay?'
Problematize correct responses	Teachers might help students become more actively engaged with the learning by problematizing a correct answer. We do all kinds of things in response to an incorrect answer, such as silence, hesitation or delay, questioning certainty ('Are you sure?'), asking for repetition or clarification (for example, 'Can you say that again?'). If we use these same strategies for a correct answer, chances are students will try harder to reach an understanding of not just what a correct answer is, but why it is correct.
Ask 'pursuit' questions	Teachers might respond to a student's correct answer by pursuing with questions such as: 'Why do you say that?' 'How did you get or arrive at that answer?' 'Go deeper into why this is a correct response. Can you explain?' 'Explain why this is a correct answer based on what we have just learnt (or based on the grammatical rules we have just studied)?' This kind of feedback affords the student an opportunity to support or defend his or her answer and to display confidence that what he or she has just said is correct or on target.
Elicit peer contribution	Teachers might draw in wider class participation by turning to others in addition to the one who initially responded and ask: 'Anyone else?' 'What

does someone else have?' 'Do you all agree?' 'Does anyone have a different answer?' These kinds of feedback questions are not intended to imply that the one who answered initially had an incorrect answer, although the teacher may need to do some initial work to change this perception or 'habit', given that it is a common practice in classrooms that when a teacher calls on more than one student regarding a particular exercise item, it is highly probable that the one who originally responded was not entirely correct. Alternative positive feedback questions such as those suggested here may open up the classroom floor for further learning opportunities, allowing *students* the chance to question, debate, or agree with answers given by other students.

Use whole class 'feedback signs'	Teachers may invite other students in the class to participate in providing feedback responses by using signals of various kinds, for example, brightly coloured, laminated cards that state: 'yes', 'no', 'maybe', or 'I agree' versus 'I disagree' that show whether they have the same answer as the one who originally responded to the exercise item in question (for form-focused instruction). This allows others in the class an opportunity to participate and reflect upon how and if their own answer differs from the one given by the original respondent. And when the teacher notices that there are differing cards held up by the students, indicating a range of varying responses to the item in question, the teacher may open up the discussion and clarify or correct erroneous responses. Ideally, the students initially do not see each other's cards or responses so that they are forced to make an independent 'judgement' on the item first.
Recognize the potential negative impact of 'very good'	Based on our analyses of the classroom data displayed above, which may be taken as indicators of what does occur in real teacher–student interaction on some occasions of form-focused instruction, we would caution teachers that in praising students for giving correct responses by offering positive feedback tokens like 'very good' ('excellent', 'good', 'wonderful', or the like), ironically, this may have a negative impact on the learning situation (potentially), shutting down the sequence, which may lead to closing off of further student participation, for example, students' further questions and comments. Teachers should use feedback tokens such as 'very good' appropriately, being sensitive to the contexts in which utterances of this kind may inhibit rather than encourage student learning and participation.
Engage in self-reflection	Just as Forgas and Tehani (op. cit.) have noted that experienced feedback givers are mindful of the impact of mood, and how that may affect the kind and frequency of feedback they give, we would suggest that (language) teachers, particularly those who are novices but perhaps more experienced ones as well, engage in some form of self-reflection of their positive feedback methods and utterances, for example, paying attention to when they use, do not use, or even overuse feedback tokens like 'very good', 'excellent', or the like. Our analyses of the data shown above reveal instances of 'very good' as possibly shutting down learning opportunities in form-focused instruction. Teachers might examine form-focused and other instructional contexts in order to get a (better) sense of when *they* use positive feedback tokens such as 'very good' (if at all).

Conduct action research	Teachers might engage in action research and have themselves videotaped teaching a (form-focused) lesson, and subsequently transcribe and analyse the videotape by themselves or with another colleague, focusing on how, where, and when they use feedback tokens like 'very good' or whatever else they offer to students in terms of positive feedback, praise, or encouragement when students give a correct response (some other forms of positive feedback may fall in the domain of non-verbal behavioural cues). Another side of this coin would be to include a 'coding scheme' for positive feedback, noting when, where, and what was provided as positive feedback on teacher observational forms used by supervisors when conducting required teacher observations. On the supervisor's part, the goal would not merely be to check off that positive feedback was provided, as if it were some taken for granted 'default setting' but to examine more actively the kind of feedback utterances which a teacher employs, their use and appropriateness in terms of furthering or possibly stifling students' participation and learning opportunities. If this kind of notation of positive feedback is included as a dimension in teachers' observational reports, teachers most certainly would (begin to) engage in self-reflection concerning how and what they provide as positive feedback. Regular self-reflection and (required) observational reports along parameters such as those proposed may enhance the quality of teacher performance and better serve the interests of those whose continued educational growth is at stake, that is the students.

What teachers might find as a result of their self-reflection and action research is that 'very good' is not something to be avoided at all cost. When 'very good' is used along with further 'pursuit' questions or the elicitation of peer contribution as discussed above, its 'case-closed' quality may be significantly mitigated. Moreover, in a less form-focused context where the task is 'open' (Kahn 2008), 'very good' may just provide the exact amount of encouragement students need in continuing their exploration. Finally, 'very good' may be necessary or even essential to encourage the participation and performance of some children, lower- and intermediate-level learners, those in special education, or any student in need of more 'stroking' or confidence-building measures. The point is, there is a very important affect dimension that 'very good' affords, and our challenge is to take advantage of the positive affect that 'very good' brings without suppressing learning opportunities.

Conclusion	Some teachers may find that they already use alternative positive feedback techniques such as those mentioned above. And indeed, teachers, in observing and being mindful of their own teaching style, may think of other ways of providing positive feedback, ones that would work for their particular classroom contexts, which have to take into consideration time and other classroom management issues as well. Overall, we are not implying that categorically there is no room for 'praise' or feedback tokens like 'very good', but that in a larger context, positive feedback should be meaningful and authentic, in tune with what a teacher hopes to accomplish in his or her teaching goal(s). We, as (language) teachers, must examine in detailed ways what feedback tokens such as 'very good' possibly *do* in classroom interaction from the perspective of promoting and encouraging students' continued learning and growth (or not), and in the data that we

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have displayed, this involves the kind of learning activity in which students focus on form. Examining, altering, or varying the ways in which teachers provide positive feedback to learners is another dimension in scaffolding instruction (Vygotsky 1978) and providing guidance or 'knowledge of results' (Allwright op. cit.: 167).

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Notes

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