

Praise for Motivating Students Who Do Not Perform Well in
English Class

A Thesis

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By

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction of the Problem

It has been pointed out that quite a few learners have problems academically, socially, and emotionally in school. One of the many possible reasons is that they are not interested in studying; they are unmotivated. As we know, one of the most serious problems in the classroom is that learners don't have motivation for studying and learning, or if they do, they have only a little. If you were to become a junior high school teacher, you would be upset that students are reluctant to study hard or attend your classes. Possibly, every school teacher now has the same feeling. Of course, teachers mustn't abandon their students because of their apathy for learning. Teachers have a duty to motivate and make students learn and, in the long run, help students have a good life. In this thesis, I will attempt to propose one possible way to motivate students, especially those who don't or can't do well in school.

1.2 Previous Studies

What is motivation? Tatsuno (1980) says that “motivation is the action of the mind that chooses the learning motivation and achieves it (p 426).” Miura (1983) says that the factors involved in motivation for learning are as follows; the students’ surroundings, the instruction, and the students themselves. In my research, I focus on the “factors of instruction.”

Tachibana (1982) suggests that there be four requirements of motivation: first, that teachers know their students thoroughly; second, that their teachers “praise students;” third, that teachers scold students properly; and fourth, teachers should thoroughly contemplate their educational materials. In this paper I will focus on the second requirement, “praise.”

Saito (1970) says that students who were praised or scolded had their learning motivation improve more than students who were ignored and controlled, and those who were praised saw the most improvement of all the groups. This implies that praise is the best way to motivate students.

Another study on praise by Anderson et. al. (1976) states that if

learning achievement is insufficient, when teachers reinforce it with positive expressions, spontaneous motivation was enhanced, while when teachers ignore it, spontaneous motivation was decreased. This result shows the importance of grasping learning achievement positively even if it is inadequate. This study also states that physical reward lessened spontaneous motivation and verbal reward enhanced it, which further suggests the necessity of praise.

1.3 Purpose of This Study

The purpose of this study is to show how to motivate junior high school students, especially those students indifferent to the classes, to become interested in their English classes. In order to get students to take part actively in their classes, it is indispensable to motivate them. As I wrote in 1.2, there are several important points to consider in order to motivate students. This study will focus on the act of praise. Teachers can praise students about many things such as homework, classroom attitude, and of course when students answer teachers' questions. When student performance is praised, whether or not they become motivated depends on the students themselves. For instance, when a teacher praises a student for his or her homework, if the student is doing well at school, he or she will not be motivated because it is quite natural and easy for him or her to finish a homework assignment; however, if a student is not performing well in school, he or she will be motivated because of the greater effort required to complete the homework assignment. This study tries to determine what kind of praise the best motivates students and when and where teachers should praise

student performance, tasks, and attitudes.

Chapter 2 Method

2.1 Subjects

The subjects of this thesis are junior high school students in the third year of two schools.

A junior high school – 82 students (Male 44, Female 38)

B junior high school – 160 students (Male 80, Female 80)

2.2 Contents of the Questionnaire

Before the junior high school students answered the questionnaire, I administrated it to university students at Osaka University and Osaka University of Commerce as a pilot survey. Considering the results of the questionnaire, I changed and decreased some questionnaire items. The final questionnaire items are as follows:

[Part 1]

I would like to know whether you like English or not and whether or not you can do well in your English classes (on a scale of one to four).

1. Do you like English or not?
2. Are you doing well in your English classes or not?

[Part 2]

How greatly are you motivated in the following situations when you receive praise (on a scale of one to four)?

1. When you can answer the teacher's questions and receive praise.

2. When you can do well on a test and receive praise.
3. When you are offered a compliment on your attitude.
4. When you can complete your assignments and receive praise.
5. When you can read the textbook properly and receive praise.
6. When you can do an interview activity, make a speech, or perform a skit and receive praise.
7. When you can understand English during listening activities and receive praise.
8. When you are praised for reading and understanding English texts.
9. When you are offered a compliment on the content of the sentences you write
10. When you are offered a compliment on the clearness and shape of your alphabet letters.
11. When you ask a question during English classes and receive praise.

[Part 3]

Please choose the three Items for situations which you are most “motivated” to receive praise and put a circle inside the parentheses.

1. When you can answer the teacher’s questions and receive praise.
2. When you can do well on a test and receive praise.
3. When you are offered a compliment on your attitude.
4. When you can complete your assignments and receive praise.
5. When you can read the textbook properly and receive praise.
6. When you can do an interview activity, make a speech, or perform a skit and receive praise.
7. When you can understand English during listening activities and receive praise.
8. When you are praised for reading and understanding English texts.
9. When you are offered a compliment on the content of the sentences you write
10. When you are offered a compliment on the clearness and shape of your

alphabet letters.

11. When you ask a question during English classes and receive praise.

[Part 4]

Please tell me about an experience of being praised which left the strongest and most positive impression on you so far (free description).

2.3 Procedure

Taking into consideration the result of the pilot survey for university students, I remade the questionnaire for junior high school students.

By having a questionnaire, I separated the students into two groups – those who like and are good at English and those who dislike and are poor at English; this was done by self-evaluation. Then I examined the differences between the two groups. There were differences concerning their preferences about the way they receive praise, and in discovering these differences, I have found an effective way to praise students who dislike and are poor at English.

Chapter 3 Results

3.1 Results of the Experiment

I will state the results of this questionnaire dividing the data into four parts from Part1 to Part4.

3.1.1 Results of Part 1

By asking the students whether they like English or not and whether or not they can do well in their English classes, I can divide the students into two groups. The higher group is composed of the students who like and are good at English and the lower group is those who dislike and are poor at English. The number of students in the higher group is 60 students and that of the lower group is 94 students.

3.1.2 Results of Part 2

The question in Part 2 is “How greatly are you motivated in the following situations when you receive praise (on a scale of one to four)?” The results of the t -test are as follows. See Table 1.

Table 1. Motivating Situations When Receiving Praise

Item	Higher group (SD)	Lower group (SD)	<i>p</i>
1	3.35 (.71)	2.47 (.95)	**
2	3.60 (.62)	2.92 (1.00)	**
3	3.31 (.82)	2.44 (.90)	**
4	3.28 (.79)	2.53 (1.1)	**
5	3.27 (.71)	2.36 (1.01)	**
6	3.38 (.69)	2.36 (1.03)	**
7	3.30 (.81)	2.41 (1.01)	**
8	3.27 (.82)	2.53 (1.02)	**
9	3.52 (.65)	2.57 (1.08)	**
10	2.75 (1.00)	2.19 (1.05)	**
11	2.90 (.94)	2.15 (1.00)	**

** $p < 0.01$

As you can see, the average of the higher group was greater than that of the lower group in all items of Part 2 and all the items were found to be significantly different.

In addition to Table 1, I selected the highest ranked five items of each group. See Table 2.

Table 2. High Ranked Items between Higher and Lower groups

Rank	Higher group	Lower group
1 st	Item 2 3.60 (.62)	Item 2 2.92 (1.00)

2 nd	Item 9 3.52 (.65)	Item 9 2.57 (1.08)
3 rd	Item 6 3.38 (.69)	Item 4 2.53 (1.1)
4 th	Item 1 3.35 (.71)	Item 8 2.53 (1.02)
5 th	Item 3 3.31 (.82)	Item 1 2.47 (.95)

The top two items were the same (Item 2 – “When you can do well on a test and receive praise;” Item 9 – “When you are offered a compliment on the content of the sentences you write).” On the other hand, Item 6 – “When you can do an interview activity, make a speech, or perform a skit and receive praise” was ranked high in only the higher group, while Items 4 and 8 (Item 4 – “When you can complete your assignments and receive praise” and Item 8 – “When you are praised for reading and understanding English texts”) were ranked high in only the lower group.

3.1.3 Results of Part 3

The question in Part 3 was “Please choose the three items for situations which you are most “motivated” to receive praise and put a circle in the parentheses.” I ranked the results of Part 3. The results were as follows. See Table 3.

Table 3. Situations in which Students are Most “motivated” to Receive Praise

Rank	Higher group 60students			Lower group 94 students		
	Item	students	proportion %	Item	students	proportion %
1 st	2	41	68.33 %	2	80	85.10 %
2 nd	9	29	48.33 %	8	37	39.36 %
3 rd	6	19	31.66 %	9	28	29.78 %
4 th	3	18	30.00 %	4	22	23.40 %
5 th	4	16	26.66 %	3	20	21.27 %
6 th	8	15	25.00 %	7	20	21.27 %
7 th	1	13	21.66 %	10	18	19.14 %
8 th	7	11	18.33 %	1	17	18.08 %
9 th	5	8	13.33 %	6	12	12.76 %
10 th	11	4	6.66 %	5	11	11.70 %
11 th	10	3	5.00 %	11	3	3.19 %

From Table 3, we can notice both similar and different points between the higher and lower groups. In light of the similar points, in both groups, Item 2 – “When you can do well on a test and receive praise” came first, although there was a difference in the proportion; about over 85% students checked Item 2 in the lower group.

Next, in terms of the different points, Three big differences by ratio were seen between the higher and lower groups: Item 6 – “When you can do an interview activity, make a speech, or perform a skit and receive praise;” Item 8 – “When you are praised for reading and understanding English texts;” and Item 10 – “When you are offered a compliment on the clearness and shape of

the alphabet letters.”

3.1.4 Results of Part 4

The question in Part 4 was “Please tell me about an experience of being praised which left the strongest and most positive impression on you so far (free description).” In the questionnaire, I set up two boxes to write down. One was for during English classes, and the other was for situations outside the English classroom, such as at home or in school. The results were as follows. See table 4.

Table 4. Experience of being Praised which Has Left the Strongest and Most Positive Impression on the Students

	All students	Higher group	Lower group
During English classes	41.6%	60.0%	28.7%
Outside English classes	51.9%	68.3%	43.6%

As Table 4 shows, 41.6% of the students and 51.9% of them wrote about their experience of being praised, but overall, the experience of being praised during the English classes ranked lower than that of being praised outside of English classes. In addition, lower-group students experienced

praise less than higher-group students in both situations.

Next, let me state the contents of the description of Part 4. During English classes, the students in both groups received praise the most from their teachers — Japanese English Teachers. This was followed by their friends and assistant language teachers (ALTs). JETs praised their students on tests the most and then on answering questions. Besides these things, teachers complimented them on their skits, assignments, the sentences they wrote, the clearness of their notebooks, and their pronunciation. Their friends praised the students on their speech the most, followed by their notebooks and tests. One praised on the diligence for solving questions. ALTs complimented the students on being able to answer the questions in English the most, followed by their pronunciation and speech. In both groups, during English classes, there were no differences in the way of praising.

Outside of English classes, the people in their families including such family members as grandmothers and siblings, overwhelmingly praised the students in contrast to other people such as friends. The students were praised on their tests the most, followed by their club activities, assignments,

reading aloud, and their life habits – getting up at the precise time for school, for example. The teachers of cram schools praised them the second most and teachers of cram schools mainly praised them on their tests. The students received compliments from their friends concerning their club activities. Only a few teachers in school praised the students during consultations. So far, there haven't been any differences in the way of praising in either group. Only in the lower group, however, did some students describe the experience of being praised by their teachers for their club activities.

Chapter 4 Discussion

4.1 Questionnaire

4.1.1 Part 1 in the Questionnaire

According to 3.1.1, the number of students who answered that they like and are good at English was smaller than that of students who answered that they dislike and are poor at English. The exact number of students in the higher group was 60 and in the lower group was 94. From this, we can say, there already exist a number of students who dislike and are poor at English at the beginning stage of learning English. Negishi and Wakabayashi (1993) say that one of the reasons why there are many students who dislike and poor at English can be related to how university students have been trained in the teacher training course. In the current course, students aren't supposed to be taught about making tests, so once they become teachers, they make irresponsible tests. The tests result in making many students dislike or feel unskilled in English. This is an important point. It is true that teachers don't learn about tests very much,

but students certainly come to dislike English, directly or indirectly, through their teachers. Sakai (2009) also founded in his survey that English as their second worst subject following Japanese.

4.1.2 Part 2 in the Questionnaire

According to the results of the *t*-test, in every item in Part 2, the average score of the higher group was higher than that of the lower group and all the items were found to be statistically significant. This could show that on any situations listed in Part 2, students in the higher group were more motivated than the lower one. So when they receive praise, they are more motivated. On the other hand, the lower group is less motivated, and when they receive praise, the praise may not have very much effect on them. Also, it can be said that the lower group has basically few experiences of being praised. Sakai (2009) says in his experiment to learn about motivation for English in which he divided his students in the same way as I did — that the higher group had higher averages in every factor, so the higher group students are motivated spontaneously and recognize the importance of English for the goals of entrance exams or obtaining employment. The lower

group, however, had lower averages in every factor but only in the item concerning the study of English as a required subject in junior high school, a higher average was shown. From this, it can be said that the lower group of students are motivated extrinsically.

When I selected the highest ranked five items of each group, the students in both groups were motivated the most when they receive praise for their tests. Probably every student is concerned about their performance on the tests by the reason that tests have a great effect on their learning results or performance report. Eventually for the students who want to go to higher ranked high schools, tests are one of the most important things.

Besides, some differences were found. In the higher group, the students were motivated well when you can do an interview activity, make a speech, or perform a skit and receive praise. In contrast, among the eleven items the students in the lower group were motivated well when they can complete their assignments and receive praise, and when they are praised for reading and understanding English texts. From these items, for the higher group, we can say it is easy enough for them to finish their

assignments or to understand English texts, that is, they can use English enough in reading and writing, especially when solving questions. Thus, they want to try and use English in speaking and listening, hoping that their performance would be praised. Lower-group students may think that speaking and listening are too difficult to do and that reading and writing are easier — that is, if they try, they can — so when they are praised for reading and understanding English texts or when they are offered a compliment on the content of the sentences they write, they are motivated. Shimizu and Sugimura (1988) say that the higher group is motivated better and the motivation for accomplishing tasks — that is, the motivation for trying to accomplish the highest learning goals possible — is significantly higher than the lower group.

Concerning the lower group, one more thing can be stated. That is, they may have difficulty in even completing their assignments, so when they receive praise for assignments, they also feel motivated.

4.1.3 Part 3 in the Questionnaire

In Part 3, I asked the students about the situations when they are motivated and to choose the best three items. The items are the same as Part 1. From Table 3, we can see that in lower-group students are motivated most when they receive praise on their tests followed by on reading and understanding English texts, on the sentences they write, and on their assignments. Here let me state in order.

First, also in Part 3, the students in both groups get motivated most when they get praise on their tests. However, interestingly, the percentage in the lower group was higher than that in the higher group by about twenty percent, that is, lower-group students were more interested in their tests than the higher group. It can be said that the reason for this is that test scores are weighed heavily, so if the students can do well on tests, they feel successful. This result shows that all students, especially those in the lower group, want to be praised and accepted when they get good scores in the test. Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale (1978), Dweck (1975), and Yamamori (2004) all say that the experience of students who can't accomplish their tasks in spite of making efforts leads to their learning helplessness.

Moreover, Pintrich & Schunk (2002) point out during the process that, when motivation is enhanced, the expectation for the results can be one factor that influences motivation. However, Yamamori (2004) says that having a feeling that one can't study any more is more likely to influence the change in motivation more than the test results. From this, it can be said that test is not everything and not only tests but also students' feelings toward students' negative self-image are deeply connected with their motivation.

Next, in the situation when they are praised for reading and understanding English texts, lower-group students are fourteen percent more motivated than higher-group students (sixth in the higher group, and second in the lower group). Reading and understanding English are also difficult tasks as well as interviews, speeches, and skits. Nevertheless, lower-group students tend to be motivated. We can speculate that the reason may be that the opportunities of reading and understanding English through textbooks are often provided and there are some tasks which are easy to answer, such as T/F questions in the textbooks. Lower-group students think they are poor at English, and at the same time, the result of Item 8 in Part 3

shows that lower-group students want to develop and improve their English.

Third, Item 9 — “when they are praised on the texts they write” was also highly ranked — second in the higher group, third in the lower group. The students in the higher group are motivated about twenty percent more than those in the lower group, but why was Item 9 highly ranked? In addition to the fact that lower-group students want to develop and improve their English, it can be considered as a reason why lower-group students place much value on reading and writing English more than listening and speaking. The lower group may regard reading and writing as basic skills and listening and speaking as higher skills.

At last, concerning assignments (Item 4), differences between groups couldn't be seen. This shows that completing assignments is hard for both groups though they both manage to do it. However, it is wondered whether students in the lower group accomplish their assignments completely. But, Part 3 shows that praising the students who did their assignments is effective. What is important is that teachers should choose the suitable tasks for individuals so that every student can accomplish their tasks and get

successful experiences. In addition, teachers should check their completed tasks carefully, writing some comments and praising precisely.

Throughout Part 3, every student, after all, may expect to be praised on what they accomplish with efforts.

On the other hand, I can recognize two different points between both groups percentage-wise. One point is, in the situation when they can do an interview activity, make a speech, or perform a skit, higher-group students are four times as motivated as lower-group students. The activities such as interviews, speeches, and skits are difficult and need oral English skills of speaking and listening, so higher-group students who can use English in writing and reading want to try these activities and receive praise. For the lower group, as I stated in the discussion of Part 2, these activities are difficult to accomplish and they have few accomplishing experiences of these activities themselves, so I speculate that these activities do not play a role as a motivator. This doesn't mean that these oral activities should not be provided to the students in the lower group. What is important is that these activities should rather be given to lower-group students according to their

English abilities.

The other point is that, in the situation when they are offered a compliment on the clearness and shape of their alphabet letters, lower-group students are motivated more than higher-group students by fourteen percent. This result is easy to interpret. While it is natural for the higher group to write their alphabet letters precisely, some students in the lower group have difficulty in writing alphabet letters. So for the lower group, complementing students on alphabet letters can be said to be effective.

4.1.4 Part 4 in the Questionnaire

Overall, the description percentage was low, and it was lower in English classes than in other situations such as at school or at home. According to this, not all students receive much praise, and lower-group students get even less praise. While, it can be considered that when students answered these questionnaires, they didn't have enough time to answer this part of the questionnaire. From these, although this is not the solution, but it can be said that English teachers cannot praise their students enough

during classes. Now, the points about which students are praised tend to be on their tests or answering questions, so teachers have to find more and different kinds of opportunities to compliment them. In the situations outside of English classes, the students' families praised the student the most, and the praising 'about tests' came first. Concerning this, Oride and Sakamoto (1985) say that tests in themselves show the attainment of academic ability about particular subjects or teaching materials. There is, however, a kind of "belief" that if students get good scores on tests, their future is ensured. The recognition that the results of the tests make decisions about the students' future has been generalized.

Outside of English classes, schools also had any effect on students' private lives. As evidence, their families are interested in tests the most, and make tests the object of praise. In this part of the questionnaire, the descriptions 'I have never been praised by anyone' or 'If I get praise by someone, it actually doesn't remain in my heart' are seen. As long as the evaluation schools make is biased toward testing and test results, only tests will be emphasized. If giving praise is based on tests, the students who can't

do well on tests, that is to say lower-group students, cannot experience being praised very much or very often.

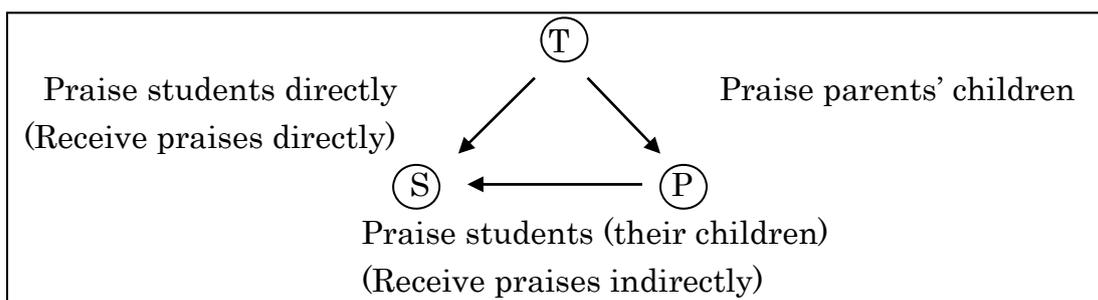
4.2 Conclusion

As I stated above, offering praises to the students on their tests can be the best motivator of all factors. This is because, in the field of education, tests are too heavily weighed. Tests in themselves reflect how teachers have conducted their English classes. However, when students get bad scores on tests, teachers blame them for the test score, and not teachers themselves. Thus, students think of tests as the most important thing and want to do well on tests and be praised. From this, we can say that the way in which tests are made is important. Making only easy tests so that every student gets a good score is difficult and impossible, taking the evaluation into consideration, but teachers should sometimes make easier tests so that those who dislike and are poor at English can get about seventy to eighty percent in their tests and enjoy the taste of success. In addition, when teachers return the tests, they should not forget to give praise or encouraging feedback to their students on their tests. Letting the lower group have successful experience is essential.

All students may want to receive compliments from teachers and

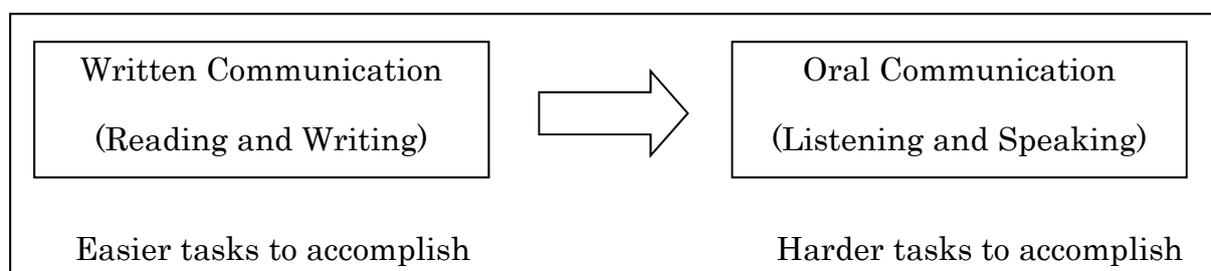
other people such as their parents, so the manner of praising is of vital importance. The lower group, as you can imagine, has few experiences of being praised. In order to increase their opportunities, some forms can be considered. As I proceeded through the steps of this study, I felt strongly the importance of the connections between not only teachers and students, but also teachers and parents or guardians. As a concrete measure, exchanging written communication frequently can be effective. The best use should be made of home visitations by teachers and consultations if necessary. In such situations, teachers can praise students and form confidential relationships with parents. This is how students can have more opportunities of receiving praises. See Figure 1. Praising students not only directly but also indirectly is possible when there is a good relationship between the teacher and the parent(s). In addition, when parents praise their children concerning praises offered by teachers, they can praise their children with their words.

Figure 1. Praising students both directly and indirectly



Although I have already stated that testing is a great motivator, in my study, it is revealed that the lower group wants to be praised when they are reading and understanding English texts more than the higher group. This can show two things. One is even lower-group students want to develop their English skills. The other is the lower group may think that reading and writing English are basic skills in English and only after they are able to read and write English, can they proceed to listening and speaking English well. This also can be the reason why lower-group students become motivated when they are offered a compliment on the content of the sentences they write. Within lower-group students, there can be a kind of figure such as shown in Figure 2. Teachers need individually-targeted tasks for fostering the basic skills and have to remember to praise students on not only for results but also for processes.

Figure 2. Within lower-group students



As whoever engages in English education knows, however, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology says in the course of study that “to develop student’s basic communication abilities such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, deepening their understanding of language and culture and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages (objective of foreign languages).” In order to foster a positive attitude toward foreign languages, teachers should have all the students including the lower group feel a willingness to use English, so how to motivate students to listen and speak English should be considered as well as performance on tests.

In my study, one more problem can be stated. There are some students who do not feel motivated at all when they receive praises and others have never experienced being praised in their lives. If students have few or no successful experiences, they feel whatever they do, they can’t succeed. Thus they are demotivated completely. What should teachers do for these students? First of all, teachers should know how to establish good relationships with students, and communicate with a mind open. Teachers

should support their students with patience. Then, teachers should thoroughly contemplate their educational materials and polish their skills of teaching English, thinking of the students, — and helping them gain confidence and experience feelings of accomplishment.

Teachers of today and the future need to utilize all their skills as not only teachers but also as human beings. Teachers must develop ways in which their students — especially students in the lower groups — can eventually break down the barriers that prevent them from both enjoying and improving their English language skills.

4.3 Limitation

In this study, I found the best ways to praise students who don't do well at school and some points to look out for in praising them according to their self-evaluations. The lower group isn't decided by academic results such as tests, so in this study grouping wasn't done completely. In addition, the verification by dividing along gender lines wasn't done. If sexes are taken into consideration, there may be some differences between males and females.

This study focused on when students feel motivated and the contents of the questionnaire followed that. The contents of the questionnaire were limited to some extent, taking into consideration the burden on that students who answered the questionnaire. However, if praise situations are detailed in more, for instance the situation when the students receive praise not directly but indirectly, some different points that aren't in my study may have appeared.

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