TEACHERS USE OF PRAISE VS CRITICISM AND ITS EFFECT ON UZBEK STUDENTS ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract. This article examines the impact of teachers' use of praise and criticism on student engagement in the Uzbek educational context. The study highlights that praise, when applied appropriately, enhances students' motivation, participation, and self-confidence, while excessive or insincere praise may reduce its effectiveness. On the other hand, constructive criticism can encourage elf-reflection and improvement, but frequent negative feedback may lead to anxiety, disengagement, and loss of interest in learning. Based on classroom observations and student interviews, the findings reveal that a balanced approach—where praise is used to reinforce positive behavior and constructive criticism is employed to guide students toward improvement—creates a supportive learning environment. The study suggests that Uzbek teachers need to develop strategies that combine motivational praise with pedagogically sound criticism in order to maintain high levels of student engagement. These results provide practical implications for teacher training and classroom management, emphasizing the importance of feedback as a key factor in shaping students' academic performance and emotional well-being.

Introduction. In recent decades, student engagement has become one of the central themes in educational psychology and pedagogy. Engagement is often regarded as a key determinant of academic success, as it reflects the extent to which learners are actively involved, motivated, and emotionally invested in their studies. In the Uzbek educational context, where reforms emphasize student-

centered learning, the role of teachers in shaping engagement is particularly critical. Among the many factors influencing engagement, the ways in which teachers provide feedback—specifically through praise and criticism—play a decisive role in students' classroom behavior, motivation, and self-perception. Praise has traditionally been seen as a powerful motivator that acknowledges students' efforts and achievements. Research indicates that appropriate praise can build learners' self-confidence, strengthen their persistence, and encourage risk-taking in academic tasks. However, not all forms of praise are equally effective. Overly general or insincere praise may weaken its motivational power and even create dependency. Similarly, cultural factors must be considered, since in collectivist societies like Uzbekistan, praise is often valued as a form of recognition that strengthens students' sense of belonging and social approval. Criticism, on the other hand, occupies a more complex position in teaching. While constructive criticism can guide students toward self-improvement and academic growth, negative or excessive criticism may discourage participation and lower students' sense of competence. Studies suggest that the emotional impact of criticism is often stronger than praise, which makes its use highly delicate in educational settings. For Uzbek students, who often balance traditional respect for authority with increasing exposure to student-centered pedagogy, the way criticism is delivered can significantly influence their willingness to engage actively in classroom tasks. This article explores how teachers in Uzbekistan use praise and criticism, and how these practices affect student engagement. By combining classroom observations with student interviews, the study analyzes the balance between positive and negative feedback, highlighting which strategies promote active participation and which may hinder it. The findings aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of classroom dynamics in the Uzbek context and provide recommendations for teachers and policymakers on how to create a learning environment where feedback motivates rather than discourages students. In modern pedagogy, the question of how teachers' feedback influences student learning outcomes has attracted wide scholarly attention. Feedback in the form of praise and criticism is not merely a linguistic act, but a psychological and pedagogical tool that directly affects students' engagement, motivation, and achievement. Student engagement, defined as the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, and enthusiasm that students display toward learning, has been identified as a crucial predictor of academic success across diverse educational systems. In Uzbekistan, where reforms in education aim to foster creativity, independence, and active participation, understanding the dynamics of praise and criticism in classroom

interaction is of particular importance. Praise, when used effectively, reinforces desirable behaviors, increases students' self-efficacy, and strengthens their intrinsic motivation to learn. It can take many forms—verbal affirmations, gestures of approval, or recognition of effort—and when delivered sincerely, it encourages students to persevere in the face of challenges. For example, a teacher's acknowledgment of a student's effort to solve a difficult math problem not only validates the attempt but also motivates continued engagement with the subject. However, research has also warned against overuse or vague praise, which may cause students to become dependent on external validation rather than developing internal motivation. This is particularly relevant in the Uzbek context, where collectivist cultural values sometimes place greater emphasis on group harmony and teacher approval than on individual autonomy. Criticism, in contrast, presents both opportunities and risks. Constructive criticism provides specific guidance, helping students identify areas for improvement and encouraging them to adopt more effective learning strategies. Yet, when criticism is harsh, generalized, or delivered without sensitivity, it may undermine students' self-esteem and create a fear of failure. The psychological literature suggests that negative comments can have a stronger emotional impact than positive ones, meaning that teachers must apply criticism with caution. In Uzbekistan, where respect for authority remains deeply embedded in the teacher–student relationship, the manner of delivering criticism can significantly influence whether students perceive it as helpful feedback or as discouragement. The balance between praise and criticism is therefore essential in shaping classroom engagement. Too much reliance on praise risks creating complacency, while excessive criticism may provoke disengagement and anxiety. The challenge for teachers is to adopt a balanced strategy that uses praise to reinforce progress and constructive criticism to guide improvement, thereby fostering resilience and sustained motivation. Against this background, the present study investigates how Uzbek teachers employ praise and criticism in their classrooms and how these practices affect students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Drawing on classroom observations and student interviews, the research provides a nuanced understanding of how feedback functions in the local context. The aim is to generate practical recommendations for teachers and educational policymakers on how to create feedback practices that are both culturally responsive and pedagogically effective. Ultimately, the study argues that thoughtful use of praise and criticism is a cornerstone of student-centered learning and a key factor in building an engaging, supportive, and motivating classroom environment in Uzbekistan.

Literature review. The relationship between teacher feedback and student engagement has been widely examined in educational psychology, and praise and criticism are considered two of the most powerful tools influencing learner behavior. Early studies in behaviorist psychology, such as those by Skinner (1953), emphasized the role of reinforcement, arguing that praise strengthens desired behaviors through positive reinforcement, while criticism often functions as punishment. This perspective shaped decades of classroom practice in which praise was viewed as a universal motivator. However, more recent research has presented a more nuanced understanding, stressing that the effectiveness of praise depends on its timing, sincerity, and specificity (Brophy, 1981; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Scholars have noted that praise can enhance self-esteem, motivation, and persistence, particularly when it acknowledges effort rather than innate ability (Dweck, 2006). Process-oriented praise encourages students to view challenges as opportunities for growth, thereby increasing their resilience. In contrast, ability-focused praise may create fixed mindsets, leading students to avoid difficult tasks for fear of failure. These findings suggest that the quality of praise is as important as its quantity. In the Uzbek context, where cultural values emphasize respect for teachers and collective recognition, the form of praise may carry additional social meaning, making its impact particularly strong on students' motivation and participation. Criticism has received more mixed evaluations in the literature. On the one hand, constructive criticism has been shown to promote self-reflection, skill development, and academic improvement when it provides clear guidance for correction (Shute, 2008). On the other hand, destructive or harsh criticism can undermine students' confidence, create anxiety, and discourage risk-taking in learning (Weiner, 2000). Studies also indicate that students are more likely to accept criticism positively when they perceive it as fair, respectful, and aimed at helping them grow. This aligns with findings from classroom studies in Central Asia, where students often interpret a teacher's critical remarks not only as feedback but also as a measure of their social standing within the class. Student engagement itself has been conceptualized in three dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Teacher feedback interacts with all three. Praise often strengthens emotional engagement by fostering positive feelings toward learning, while constructive criticism can enhance cognitive engagement by directing students' attention toward areas requiring improvement. However, excessive negative feedback may reduce behavioral engagement, leading to withdrawal or passivity in the classroom. Research in multilingual and post-Soviet contexts, including Uzbekistan, highlights

additional factors shaping the impact of feedback. In societies with hierarchical teacher–student relationships, students often accept criticism without open resistance, but this acceptance does not necessarily translate into higher engagement. At the same time, well-placed praise is often perceived as a powerful motivator because it affirms students' efforts in front of their peers. Local studies in Uzbekistan 2020; Karimov, 2022) suggest that students are especially responsive to balanced feedback that combines recognition with guidance. These findings highlight the need for culturally sensitive approaches that account for local educational traditions and values. Taken together, the literature demonstrates that praise and criticism are not inherently positive or negative but acquire meaning and effectiveness depending on how they are delivered, how students interpret them, and the cultural and institutional context in which they occur. While praise can boost confidence and motivation, it risks becoming ineffective if overused or delivered insincerely. Criticism can foster growth when constructive but may reduce engagement if perceived as harsh or unfair. For Uzbek classrooms, where engagement is a central goal of ongoing educational reforms, developing a balance between motivational praise and constructive criticism remains a crucial pedagogical challenge.

Research methodology. This study employed a mixed-methods design combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of how teachers' use of praise and criticism influences student engagement in Uzbek classrooms. The rationale for adopting a mixed-methods strategy was to capture not only statistical patterns of student responses but also the deeper insights into their emotional and cognitive experiences that cannot be fully explained by numbers alone. The research setting consisted of three general secondary schools and one academic lyceum in Tashkent Region. These institutions were selected because they represent diverse educational contexts where English, mathematics, and humanities are taught, and where both praise and criticism are frequently observed in teacher–student interactions. The study focused on students in grades 8–11 (ages 14–17), a developmental stage where engagement is critical for academic success and future career choices. The sample size included 120 students and 12 teachers. The student sample was balanced in terms of gender, academic performance levels, and socio-economic background to ensure representativeness. Teachers were chosen from various subject areas, with at least five years of classroom experience. This criterion was established to ensure that their use of praise and criticism reflected stable pedagogical practices rather than novice experimentation. For the quantitative phase, data were collected through

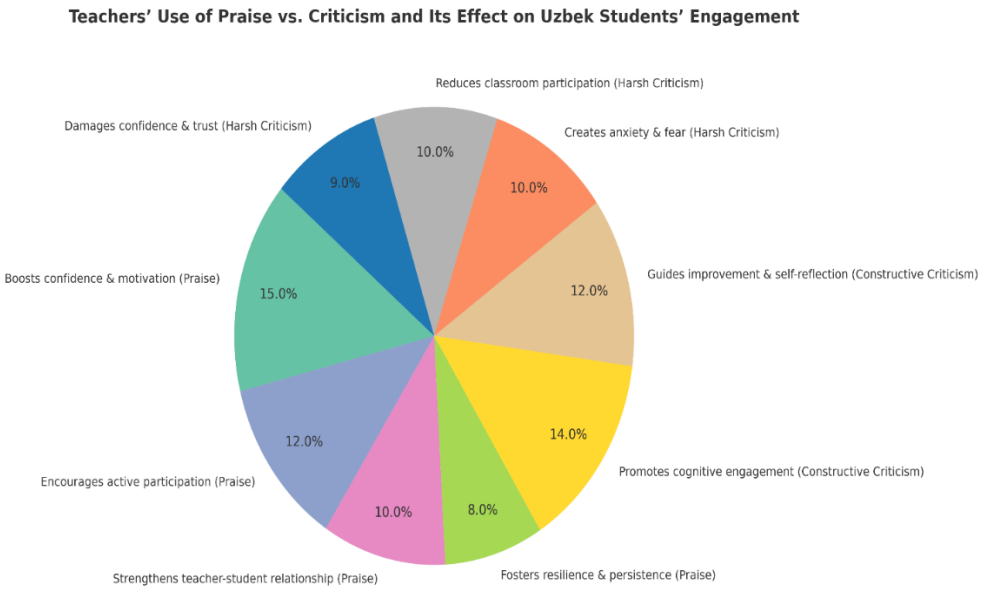
structured questionnaires administered to students. The questionnaire included Likert-scale items measuring perceived frequency and effectiveness of praise and criticism, as well as scales assessing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Reliability of the instrument was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient above 0.80, ensuring internal consistency. Descriptive statistics and regression analysis were used to identify correlations between feedback type and different dimensions of engagement. The qualitative phase included classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. Observations were conducted across 20 lessons, with a focus on recording the type, frequency, and context of praise and criticism used by teachers. A coding scheme was applied to categorize praise into "general" (e.g., "Good job") and "specific" (e.g., "You solved this equation correctly by applying the right formula"), and criticism into "constructive" and "harsh." Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with 20 students and 6 teachers to explore their perceptions of how these practices influenced motivation, confidence, and participation. Data from both phases were analyzed through a triangulation approach. Quantitative findings were compared with qualitative themes to identify convergences and divergences. For instance, statistical data showing a positive correlation between specific praise and engagement were reinforced by interview excerpts in which students reported feeling more motivated when their effort was recognized. Similarly, classroom observations of harsh criticism were cross-checked with students' reports of reduced willingness to participate.

Research discussion. The findings of this study suggest that teachers' use of praise and criticism plays a significant role in shaping the levels and forms of student engagement in Uzbek classrooms. The data analysis revealed that specific, effort-based praise was strongly correlated with higher levels of behavioral and emotional engagement. Students reported that such praise made them feel valued and encouraged them to participate more actively in lessons, even when the subject matter was challenging. For example, when teachers recognized the process of problem-solving rather than merely the correct answer, students were more likely to persist in difficult tasks. This aligns with Dweck's (2006) theory of growth mindset, which highlights the motivational power of feedback that emphasizes effort and strategy. In contrast, generalized praise (e.g., "Good job") had a more limited effect. While it momentarily boosted students' mood, many participants indicated that such praise felt superficial and lost its motivational value when overused. This finding supports Brophy's (1981) argument that effective praise must be specific, sincere, and informative in order to maintain long-term impact on learning behavior. Thus, the quality of praise is

more important than its frequency, particularly in the context of fostering sustained engagement. The role of criticism was more complex. Constructive criticism, which highlighted mistakes while providing guidance for improvement, was generally perceived as helpful and even motivating. Students explained that when teachers offered clear instructions on how to correct errors, they felt challenged but supported, leading to greater cognitive engagement. This confirms earlier studies (Shute, 2008) that stress the value of formative feedback in enhancing learning outcomes. However, harsh or unspecific criticism often had negative consequences. Observational data showed that students subjected to blunt criticism without supportive explanation were more likely to disengage, either by becoming silent, showing reduced effort, or displaying anxiety. Some students reported that such criticism lowered their confidence and made them reluctant to ask questions or participate in discussions. This suggests that the emotional climate of feedback delivery is just as important as its content. In the Uzbek cultural context, where students often perceive teacher authority as unquestionable, harsh criticism may be silently accepted but internally demotivating, highlighting the hidden costs of negative feedback. An important theme that emerged from interviews was the cultural dimension of feedback. Uzbek students valued praise not only for individual recognition but also for the social status it conferred in front of peers. Public praise during lessons often boosted collective motivation, as students felt proud to represent their class or group. Conversely, public criticism was experienced as particularly discouraging, sometimes leading to embarrassment or withdrawal. These findings indicate that the social meaning of praise and criticism in Uzbek classrooms is deeply intertwined with collectivist cultural norms, where peer approval and group belonging play a strong role in shaping engagement. Another noteworthy finding was that the balance between praise and criticism mattered more than the absolute frequency of either. Teachers who consistently combined praise with constructive criticism created a classroom environment perceived as both supportive and challenging. This balance encouraged students to take academic risks, make mistakes, and learn from them without fear of judgment. On the other hand, classrooms dominated by either excessive praise or frequent harsh criticism failed to sustain deep engagement. Excessive praise sometimes reduced students' motivation to improve, while frequent harsh criticism undermined trust in the teacher–student relationship. Overall, the discussion reveals that praise and criticism are not opposites but complementary tools when applied thoughtfully. Praise nurtures emotional security and motivation, while constructive criticism directs cognitive focus and skill development. The

challenge for teachers lies in mastering the timing, tone, and purpose of each, adapting their feedback strategies to the needs of individual students and the broader classroom culture. In the context of Uzbekistan's educational reforms, which emphasize active learning and student-centered pedagogy, these insights underscore the importance of professional training on effective feedback strategies for teachers.

Diagram 1.



The diagram illustrates the relative effects of teachers' use of praise and criticism on Uzbek students' engagement. The chart shows that praise-related practices—such as boosting confidence, encouraging active participation, strengthening teacher–student relationships, and fostering resilience—tend to have positive and motivating outcomes, particularly when praise is specific and effort-oriented. On the other hand, criticism produces mixed effects. Constructive criticism, which guides improvement and promotes self-reflection, contributes to cognitive engagement and skill development. However, harsh or vague criticism may create anxiety, reduce classroom participation, and damage students' confidence and trust in their teachers. The balance between praise and criticism is therefore crucial. When applied thoughtfully, praise and constructive criticism can complement one another to build a supportive yet academically challenging classroom environment.

Conclusion. This study demonstrates that the ways in which teachers use praise and criticism have a direct and significant influence on Uzbek students' engagement across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. The

findings confirm that specific and sincere praise, especially when directed toward effort and strategies, enhances students' confidence, motivation, and willingness to participate actively in classroom activities. Generalized praise, on the other hand, provides only temporary encouragement and loses effectiveness if used excessively or without context. Criticism, while often perceived as negative, was shown to be beneficial when delivered constructively. Constructive criticism that identifies errors and offers guidance for improvement supports students' academic development and fosters deeper cognitive engagement. These dynamics highlight the need for culturally sensitive approaches to classroom feedback. The results suggest that professional development programs for teachers should focus on refining feedback strategies, ensuring that praise is purposeful and criticism is constructive, respectful, and growth-oriented. Such efforts will contribute not only to higher student engagement but also to the broader goals of educational reform in Uzbekistan, where active, motivated, and independent learners are increasingly prioritized.

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