

The Role of Praise and Encouragement in Constructing Legitimate English Use in Online English Learning in Georgia

ქებისა და წახალისების როლი ინგლისური ენის ლეგიტიმური გამოყენების ჩამოყალიბებაში: საქართველოში ინგლისური ენის ონლაინ სწავლების მაგალითზე

ნინო პაპუნაშვილი

თბილისის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი

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ქება განიმარტება, როგორც პოზიტიური უკუკავშირი, რომელიც ხელს უწყობს სასურველი შედეგის ან ქცევის განმტკიცებას (Burnett, 2002). მას მნიშვნელოვანი ადგილი უკავია ენის სწავლების პროცესში, რადგან ზრდის შემსწავლელთა მოტივაციას და მონაწილეობს მათი, როგორც ენის მომხმარებელთა, იდენტობის ჩამოყალიბებაში. ამასთანავე, ქება მნიშვნელოვან როლს ასრულებს „ლეგიტიმური ინგლისურის“ ცნების ფორმირებაში, რომელიც სოციალური ურთიერთქმედების შედეგად ყალიბდება და დაკავშირებულია დომინანტურ ენობრივ ნორმებსა და მშობლიურ ენაზე მოსაუბრეთა შესახებ არსებულ წარმოდგენებთან (Leung, Harris, & Rampton, 1997; Canagarajah, 2007). (Leung, Harris, & Rampton, 1997; Canagarajah, 2007). წინამდებარე სტატიის მიზანია, შეისწავლოს ქებისა და წახალისების გავლენა შემსწავლელთა მოტივაციაზე და გააანალიზოს მათი შეხედულებები იმის შესახებ, თუ რა მიიჩნევა ინგლისური ენის მისაღებ და ლეგიტიმურ გამოყენებად.

სტატიაში გამოყენებულია თვისებრივი, კვლევითი მიდგომა, რომელიც ეფუძნება სოციოკულტურულ თეორიასა და ენობრივი ლეგიტიმურობის კონცეფციას. მონაცემები შეგროვდა კითხვარების საშუალებით, რომლებშიც მონაწილეობდნენ სხვადასხვა ონლაინ ინგლისური ენის სასწავლო პლატფორმების მომხმარებლები და მასწავლებლები. კვლევა ასევე მოიცავს არსებული სამეცნიერო ლიტერატურის მიმოხილვასა და ციფრულ საგანმანათლებლო გარემოში ქების პრაქტიკის ანალიზს.

კვლევის შედეგებმა გამოავლინა ქების მიმართ შემსწავლელთა ორი განსხვავებული დამოკიდებულება. ერთი მხრივ, ზოგიერთი შემსწავლელი ქებას

აღიქვამს როგორც მოტივაციის გამაძლიერებელ და მხარდამჭერ ფაქტორს, რომელიც აძლიერებს მათ თავდაჯერებულობას და საკუთარი ინგლისური ენის გამოყენების ლეგიტიმურობის განცდას. მეორე მხრივ, ზოგიერთი შემსწავლელი კონკრეტული და კონსტრუქციული მითითებების გარეშე მიღებულ ქებას ბუნდოვნად ან უჩვეულოდ მიიჩნევს, რაც მათში ენობრივი ნორმებისა და სტანდარტების მიმართ გაურკვევლობას იწვევს. მიღებული შედეგები მიუთითებს ისეთი უკუკავშირის პრაქტიკის აუცილებლობაზე, რომელიც ერთდროულად იქნება მოტივაციის განმამტკიცებელი, გასაგები და ყოვლისმომცველი.

კვლევის დასკვნის მიხედვით, ონლაინ სწავლების პროცესში ეფექტური ქება უნდა ეფუძნებოდეს დაბალანსებულ მიდგომას, რომელიც აერთიანებს როგორც ემოციურ მხარდაჭერას, ისე მკაფიო პედაგოგიურ მიზნებს. ამგვარი მიდგომა ხელს უწყობს შემსწავლელთა მოტივაციის ზრდას და მათში საკუთარი ენობრივი შესაძლებლობებისა და ინგლისური ენის გამოყენების ლეგიტიმურობის მყარი განცდის ჩამოყალიბებას.

Keywords: Reinforcement, legitimate English, praise, influence, online teaching

საკვანძო სიტყვები: განმტკიცება, ლეგიტიმური ინგლისური, ქება, გავლენა, ონლაინ სწავლება

1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has significantly transformed English language education, particularly through the widespread adoption of online learning platforms. Increased accessibility to these platforms has enabled learners to study English more efficiently regardless of geographical location (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). This technological transformation has fundamentally altered the nature of teacher–student interaction, which is increasingly mediated through digital communication tools. Consequently, patterns of communication between educators and learners have evolved, resulting in changes in both the delivery and quality of feedback (Salmon, 2011).

Although online learning offers considerable flexibility and convenience, contributing to its growing popularity, researchers have questioned whether the quality of interaction in virtual classrooms is comparable to that of traditional face-to-face instruction. Studies suggest that the absence of non-verbal communication, spontaneous interaction, and immediate feedback may reduce opportunities for effective interpersonal communication and meaningful learner engagement (Garrison, 2011). Furthermore, developing the personal connections that naturally emerge in conventional classrooms can be more challenging in online learning environments (Moore, 2013). Nevertheless, the continued expansion of online English learning platforms demonstrates their considerable potential to enhance language learning outcomes when supported by effective instructional strategies and well-designed feedback practices.

In Georgia, the role of English has changed considerably since the country's transition following the collapse of the Soviet Union. During the Soviet period, Russian functioned as the dominant foreign language in education, whereas the post-Soviet era has been characterized by a gradual shift toward English as the principal international language for education, employment, and global communication. This transition has been reinforced by educational reforms, increasing international mobility, and Georgia's closer political, economic, and cultural engagement with Europe and the wider international community. As a result, proficiency in English has become an important educational and professional objective for many Georgian learners. The rapid digitalization of education, accelerated by technological innovation and the expansion of online learning opportunities, has further transformed English language teaching in Georgia. Online language schools, private tutoring platforms, and virtual classrooms have become increasingly common, creating new forms of interaction between teachers and learners. Within these digital environments, feedback and particularly praise has become an essential pedagogical tool for supporting learner motivation, encouraging participation, and facilitating language development. At the same time, online learning environments raise important questions regarding how learners interpret teacher feedback and how praise contributes to their understanding of what constitutes appropriate or legitimate English use. Although previous research has extensively examined the relationship between praise, motivation, and language learning (e.g., Burnett, 2002; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Dörnyei, 2001), relatively little attention has been paid to these issues within the Georgian educational context. Furthermore, while studies on feedback and learner motivation have explored the role of praise as a motivational strategy (e.g., Dörnyei, 2007; Ellis, 2009), fewer studies have investigated how praise functions as a mechanism through which learners develop perceptions of legitimate English use, particularly in online learning environments. Given the growing importance of digital language education in Georgia, this represents a significant gap in the existing literature.

The present study **addresses this gap** by examining the role of praise and reinforcement in constructing learners' perceptions of legitimate English use in online English learning in Georgia. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory, sociocultural approaches to language learning, theories of language ideology and legitimacy, and Semantic Legitimation Code Theory, the study explores how different forms of praise influence learner motivation, confidence, and perceptions of acceptable English use. By integrating motivational and sociolinguistic perspectives, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of feedback practices in online English education and offers practical implications for teachers, curriculum developers, and educational policymakers working in increasingly digital learning environments.

2. Theoretical Framework

From a psychological perspective, praise is closely associated with self-esteem and motivation. When used effectively, it can strengthen learners' confidence, encourage active participation, and promote a greater sense of competence. According to Self Determination

Theory, developed by Deci and Ryan (2000), individuals have three fundamental psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Appropriate praise can support these needs, increasing learners' intrinsic motivation and encouraging deeper engagement with learning. Neuroscientific research further suggests that receiving praise activates reward related areas of the brain, including the ventral striatum, producing positive emotional responses that reinforce desirable behaviours (Izuma, Saito, & Sadato, 2008). Educational researchers Hattie and Timperley (2007) argue that praise is most effective when it is linked to specific achievements or aspects of performance. Such feedback enables learners to recognise their progress, identify successful learning strategies, and develop confidence in their ability to achieve future goals. In contrast, vague or excessive praise may reduce its educational value by encouraging dependence on external approval rather than fostering intrinsic motivation (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001). Self Determination Theory also emphasises that the effectiveness of praise depends on the way it is delivered. Praise that supports learners' autonomy and acknowledges their effort and progress enhances intrinsic motivation, encouraging learners to engage in learning because they find it meaningful and rewarding. Conversely, praise that is perceived as controlling or focused solely on performance may promote extrinsic motivation, in which learners become primarily concerned with rewards or approval rather than the learning process itself (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Within language learning, praise performs both motivational and pedagogical functions. In addition to encouraging learners, it provides feedback about successful language use and guides learners towards the linguistic practices that are recognised and valued within the learning environment. Bandura (1997) argues that praise for accurate language use strengthens learners' confidence and self-efficacy, encouraging them to take risks, experiment with new linguistic forms, and participate more actively in communication. As a result, praise contributes not only to language development but also to learners' willingness to use the target language with greater confidence. The role of praise is particularly significant in online English learning environments, where teacher feedback often serves as one of the primary forms of interaction between teachers and learners. In such contexts, praise may influence not only learners' motivation but also their perceptions of what constitutes successful and legitimate English use. This perspective is central to the present study, which examines how praise shapes both learner motivation and understandings of legitimate English in online language learning.

3. Literature review

3.1 Importance of Language Use and Legitimacy

It is vital for students to develop an understanding of what constitutes legitimate usage of the language and which forms are thought to be appropriate in various contexts in the process of the acquisition of the English language. Fairly crucial is the role of motivation, which promotes students to overcome the challenges ingrained in language learning. Praise and reinforcement serve as key motivational factors that play a significant role in shaping

students' perceptions of legitimate English usage and their overall progress. The role of reinforcement and praise in language studying is a controversial issue. While positive feedback is widely recognized as a tool to enhance motivation and foster a sense of legitimacy in language use, there are concerns about the potential drawbacks of over-reliance on such rewards. According to Kohn (1993), external rewards like praise can undermine intrinsic motivation, leading learners to focus more on the rewards themselves rather than the learning process. Kohn (1993) argues that excessive praise, much like other forms of external reinforcement, may lead to students becoming dependent on validation, diminishing their long-term engagement and self-driven learning. This perspective is relevant in the context of English language learning, where the challenge of using the language appropriately often overlaps with learners' motivation to improve their skills. While praise and positive reinforcement are valuable tools for sustaining student motivation, they should be applied thoughtfully. Excessive or poorly timed use may unintentionally undermine students' sense of autonomy and hinder their deeper engagement with the learning process.

3.2 Ideologies of Language Learning

Language ideologies refer to the beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes that individuals and communities hold about language, its use, and its social significance. These ideologies play a central role in shaping learners' educational experiences by influencing perceptions of what constitutes "correct," "standard," or "legitimate" language use (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). Consequently, they affect not only language learning practices but also learners' motivation, confidence, and identity development. Within English language education, dominant language ideologies have traditionally privileged standardized varieties such as Received Pronunciation and General American English, often positioning them as the most desirable models for language learning while marginalizing other legitimate varieties of English (Kachru, 1992). Such perspectives frequently portray language learning as the pursuit of a single, idealized standard, reinforcing hierarchical distinctions between native and non-native speakers. As a result, learners may experience pressure to conform to these idealized norms, which can undermine their confidence and overlook the linguistic diversity that characterizes English as a global language (Pennycook, 1994). The global spread of English and the increasing accessibility of online learning have challenged traditional native-speaker models. There is growing recognition that English functions as an international language used by diverse communities around the world rather than belonging exclusively to native speakers (Jenkins, 2007; Canagarajah, 2007). From this perspective, successful communication, intelligibility, and intercultural competence become more important than strict adherence to a single standardized variety. This shift encourages educators to adopt pedagogical approaches that value learners' diverse linguistic backgrounds while promoting a more inclusive understanding of legitimate English use.

These developments are particularly relevant in online English learning environments, where teacher feedback serves not only as a source of motivation but also as an important mechanism through which learners interpret acceptable language practices. Praise

communicates implicit messages about which linguistic forms and communicative behaviors are valued within a learning community. Consequently, the way praise is delivered can either reinforce traditional native-speaker ideologies or encourage broader, more inclusive conceptions of legitimate English that recognize communicative effectiveness, learner progress, and linguistic diversity.

This perspective is further supported by **Semantic Legitimation Code Theory** (Maton, 2014), which explains how educational practices construct and communicate what is regarded as legitimate knowledge within a learning environment. From the perspective of Legitimation Code Theory, praise functions as more than positive reinforcement; it acts as an evaluative mechanism through which teachers signal which forms of language use are recognized, valued, and rewarded. Consequently, praise contributes to learners' understanding of legitimate English by shaping their perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic performance in online classrooms.

Understanding the relationship between language ideology, praise, and legitimacy is therefore essential for designing effective feedback practices in online English learning. Praise that recognizes learner progress, communicative effectiveness, and linguistic diversity, rather than strict conformity to idealized native-speaker norms, has the potential to foster learner motivation, strengthen linguistic confidence, and support the development of positive language identities. Such an approach aligns with contemporary perspectives on English as an international language while promoting more inclusive and equitable online learning environments.

3.3 Semantic Legitimation Code Theory and Its Relevance to Praise and Legitimate English Use in Online Learning

Semantic Legitimation Code Theory (LCT), developed by Karl Maton (2014), provides a useful framework for understanding how particular forms of knowledge and behaviour come to be regarded as legitimate within educational contexts. Rather than viewing legitimacy as a fixed concept, LCT explains how educational practices shape learners' understanding of what is valued, recognised, and rewarded. One of its key concepts is the semantic code, which focuses on how meaning is constructed and recognised as valuable in learning environments. In the context of online English learning, LCT offers a valuable perspective for examining the role of praise. Praise is not simply a way of encouraging students. It also communicates which forms of language use are recognised and appreciated by teachers. Through praise, learners receive implicit messages about what counts as successful or appropriate English, which, in turn, influences what they consider important to learn and how they develop their understanding of legitimate English use.

Teachers' feedback plays an important role in this process. Praise that is clear and specific, for example by recognising accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary, or effective communication, helps learners understand the language practices that are valued in the classroom. Such feedback not only reinforces learning but also contributes to learners' confidence by making expectations more transparent. In contrast, praise that is vague or

inconsistent may leave learners uncertain about what they have done well and what is expected of them, which can reduce both motivation and confidence.

Viewing praise through the lens of **Semantic Legitimation Code Theory** also highlights its broader educational function. Beyond encouraging participation or recognising achievement, praise contributes to constructing learners' perceptions of legitimate language use. It shapes the standards against which learners evaluate their own performance and influences the way they position themselves as English users within the learning community. This perspective is particularly relevant to the present study. While Self Determination Theory explains how praise influences learners' motivation, LCT helps explain how the same praise communicates what is considered legitimate English in online learning environments. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for examining not only whether praise motivates learners but also how it shapes their perceptions of appropriate language use, their linguistic confidence, and their developing language identities. So, looking at praise through the lens of Semantic Legitimation Code Theory helps us see it as more than just encouragement. It shows how praise can influence what learners see as legitimate English, how they're motivated, and how they grow as language users.

3.4 The Role of Praise in Language Learning

Praise is a form of positive feedback that recognizes a student's progress or achievement. The word itself comes from Latin roots meaning "value" or "price," which reflects its deeper purpose: to show that a student's efforts or actions matter (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). In education, praise does more than just reward success; it helps students feel seen, valued, and supported.

From a psychological perspective, praise is closely linked to self-esteem and motivation. When used effectively, it can boost a student's confidence, encourage participation, and build a stronger sense of ability. According to Self-Determination Theory, developed by Deci and Ryan (2000), students have basic psychological needs such as competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Praise can meet these needs, helping learners engage more deeply and achieve more. Neuroscientific studies also show that receiving praise activates reward-related areas of the brain, such as the ventral striatum, producing pleasure and reinforcing positive behaviors (Izuma, Saito, & Sadato, 2008).

Educational researchers Hattie and Timperley (2007) emphasize that praise is most effective when it is tied to specific achievements. This kind of targeted feedback helps learners understand their progress and believe in their ability to achieve future goals. On the other hand, vague or excessive praise can have negative effects, leading students to rely too much on external approval and weakening intrinsic motivation (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001).

Self-Determination Theory also highlights the importance of how praise is delivered. When praise supports a student's independence and learning process, it enhances intrinsic motivation the desire to engage in learning for its own sake. However, if praise is perceived as controlling or focused only on performance, it can lead to extrinsic motivation doing something for rewards or approval which is less sustainable over time (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

In the context of language learning, praise plays an especially important role. It functions not only as a motivational tool but also as a pedagogical strategy. Drawing on Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, praise for accurate language use can strengthen learners' confidence and sense of self-efficacy. As learners become more confident in their abilities, they are more willing to take risks, experiment with new language structures, and participate actively in communication. In this way, praise supports both emotional development and language acquisition.

However, for praise to be truly effective especially in language learning it needs to be meaningful. It should be specific, aligned with the task at hand, and appropriate to the student's developmental level. When praise is used thoughtfully, it can promote sustained motivation and help learners grow not just in their language skills, but in their confidence and identity as language users.

4. Research Questions

This study examines the role of praise and feedback in online English learning environments. It addresses the following **research question**: How do praise and reinforcement in these settings shape students' perceptions of what constitutes "good" or legitimate English?

A central focus of the research is students' responses to the praise they receive in online learning environments, particularly whether it enhances their motivation and supports their language development or produces less positive outcomes. The study also explores the effects of both excessive and insufficient praise. Specifically, it investigates whether the amount of praise learners receive influences their motivation and shapes their perceptions of their own English proficiency.

Another important aspect of the study is the role of teachers' feedback. It examines how praise and corrective feedback influence learners' confidence and their perceptions of themselves as English users.

By exploring these questions, the study aims to provide a better understanding of the relationship between feedback and learner motivation in online English learning. Ultimately, it seeks to identify ways in which teachers and online learning platforms can more effectively support learners' language development while fostering confidence and positive perceptions of legitimate English use.

5. Methodology

This study employed an online survey distributed through Facebook groups dedicated to online English teaching and learning. The survey targeted both teachers and students who were actively involved in virtual English education.

A total of **58 participants** took part in the study, including **29 students** and **29 teachers**, all of whom had experience with online English learning or teaching. All participants were

Georgian, providing a shared cultural and linguistic context that was relevant to the aims of the study. This context allowed the research to explore participants' perceptions of praise and legitimate English use within a common educational and sociolinguistic setting. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling by sharing the survey in Facebook communities related to English language teaching and learning. Although the sample was not intended to be statistically representative, it included participants with different levels of English proficiency and diverse teaching experiences, allowing for a range of perspectives on praise and feedback in online learning.

The questionnaire consisted of **28 questions** and focused on two main areas:

- teaching strategies used to encourage student engagement in online English learning; and
- the influence of praise on learner motivation and perceptions of what constitutes correct or acceptable English.

The questionnaire included both multiple choice and open-ended questions. Several multiple-choice items allowed participants to select more than one response, while the open-ended questions provided opportunities to describe personal experiences and opinions in greater detail.

Participation in the study was voluntary, and all responses were collected anonymously. Participants were informed that their identities would remain confidential in order to encourage honest and open responses regarding their experiences of praise and feedback in online learning environments.

The quantitative data obtained from the multiple-choice questions were analysed using descriptive statistics to identify common patterns in teaching practices, learner motivation, and perceptions of legitimate English use. The qualitative responses were analysed using thematic analysis, which enabled the identification of recurring themes and provided a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and attitudes towards praise and feedback in online English learning.

6. Results

6.1 Praise as a provider for correct English use

One of the survey questions explored how teacher praise for correct English use influenced students' language learning. As shown in Figure 1, the majority of students, **82.9% (n = 34)**, reported that praise encouraged them to use English more accurately and confidently. In contrast, **9.8% (n = 4)** indicated that praise made them worry about making mistakes, while **7.3% (n = 3)** reported that praise did not significantly affect their learning. None of the respondents selected the option indicating that praise reduced their motivation to make an effort.

The findings suggest that praise generally has a positive influence on learners' confidence and willingness to use English. Most participants viewed praise as a source of encouragement that increased their motivation to participate and communicate more actively during online lessons. These responses indicate that praise can reinforce learners' confidence while promoting greater engagement with language learning.

The results can be interpreted through the lens of Self Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which proposes that learners are more motivated when their need for competence is supported. Positive feedback appears to strengthen learners' belief in their language abilities, encouraging continued participation and persistence in the learning process. At the same time, Semantic Legitimation Code Theory (Maton, 2014) provides an additional perspective by suggesting that praise communicates which forms of language use are recognised and valued within the learning environment. In this way, praise functions not only as motivation but also as a mechanism through which learners develop their understanding of legitimate English use.

Although the overall responses were positive, the findings also reveal that praise does not affect all learners in the same way. A small proportion of participants reported that praise increased their anxiety about making mistakes. This suggests that praise may sometimes create pressure to maintain a certain level of performance, particularly when learners become concerned about meeting teachers' expectations. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that praise can become less effective when it is perceived as evaluative rather than supportive (Henderikx et al., 2017).

Overall, the results indicate that praise is most effective when it provides meaningful recognition of learners' progress while creating a supportive learning environment. Rather than simply increasing motivation, praise appears to influence how learners evaluate their own language abilities and how they understand the characteristics of successful and legitimate English use in online learning.

When your instructor praises your use of correct English, how does it affect your language learning?
(for students)

41 responses

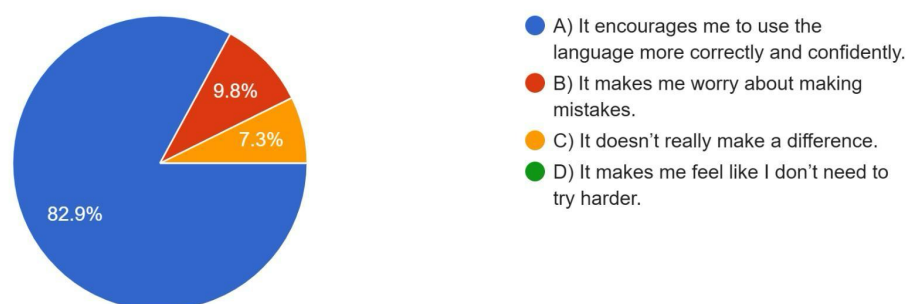


Table 1. Student Responses to the Effects of Praise for Correct English Use

6.2 The Power of Praise: Enhancing Understanding in Language Learning

Students were also asked whether praise helps them understand what is considered acceptable or legitimate English use in online learning. As shown in Figure 2, **58.5% (n = 24)** of respondents agreed that praise helps them recognise appropriate language use. A further **22.0% (n = 9)** reported that praise is only sometimes helpful because it is not always applied consistently. In contrast, **12.2% (n = 5)** stated that praise does not influence their understanding of English use, while **7.3% (n = 3)** believed that praise provides no useful information about language correctness.

The findings suggest that, for most learners, praise functions as more than a source of encouragement. It also provides information about which forms of language use are recognised and valued within the online classroom. In this respect, praise contributes to learners' understanding of legitimate English by reinforcing the language practices that teachers consider appropriate. This finding is consistent with Semantic Legitimation Code Theory (Maton, 2014), which argues that educational practices communicate what is regarded as legitimate knowledge within a learning environment. In the context of language learning, praise appears to act as one of the mechanisms through which these expectations are communicated. The findings may also be interpreted from a sociocultural perspective. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning develops through interaction with more knowledgeable others, with feedback playing an important role in supporting learners' development. When praise is specific and connected to successful language use, it helps learners recognise effective linguistic choices and gradually internalise them as part of their developing communicative competence. However, the results also indicate that praise is not always perceived as equally informative. Nearly one quarter of respondents reported that praise only sometimes helps them understand appropriate language use, suggesting that its effectiveness depends on how consistently and explicitly it is provided. When praise lacks clear links to learners' performance, its educational value may be reduced, making it more difficult for learners to understand why particular language choices are considered successful.

Similarly, the responses of participants who reported that praise had little or no influence on their understanding of English use support previous research suggesting that vague or overly general praise may have limited instructional value (Henderikx et al., 2017). These findings reinforce the importance of providing praise that is specific, meaningful, and directly connected to learners' language performance.

Overall, the results indicate that praise performs both motivational and instructional functions in online English learning. Beyond encouraging participation, it helps learners interpret the linguistic expectations of the learning environment and contributes to their understanding of legitimate English use. This suggests that carefully designed praise can support both learner motivation and language development while fostering greater awareness of successful English use.

Do you feel that praise in online English learning helps you understand what is considered "correct" English? (for students)

41 responses

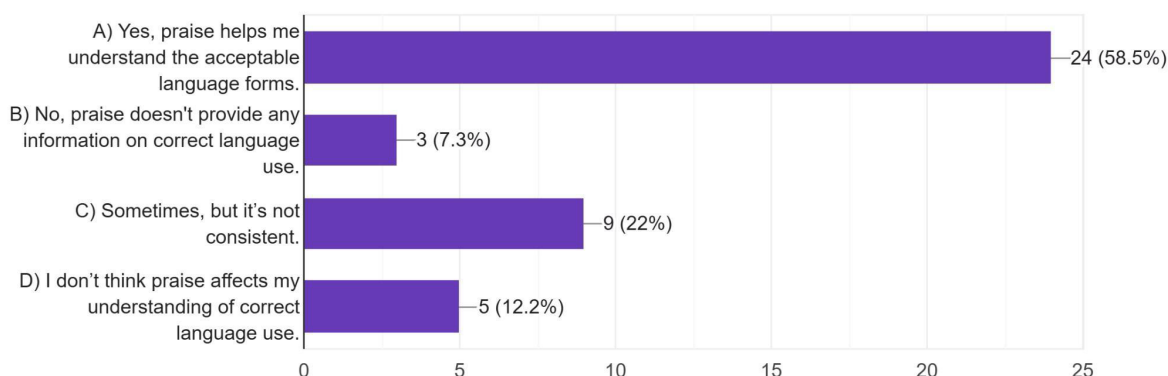


Table 2. Students' Perceptions of the Role of Praise in Understanding Legitimate English Use

6.3 Praise from Teachers' Perspective

Teachers were asked how praise influences students' understanding of legitimate English use in online learning. As shown in Figure 3, the majority of respondents, **81.1% (n = 30)**, believed that praise helps students internalise and understand appropriate language use. In contrast, **8.1% (n = 3)** indicated that praise may encourage learners to imitate language forms without developing a deeper understanding. A further **5.4% (n = 2)** reported that praise can confuse students about what constitutes appropriate English use, while another **5.4% (n = 2)** believed that praise has little or no effect on learners' understanding.

The findings suggest that teachers generally view praise as an important pedagogical strategy that supports both language learning and learner development. Most participants considered praise to be more than a motivational tool, recognising its role in helping learners identify successful language use and develop a clearer understanding of acceptable English within the online classroom. This finding is consistent with Semantic Legitimation Code Theory (Maton, 2014), which proposes that educational practices communicate what is recognised as legitimate knowledge. In this context, praise appears to function as a means through which teachers signal the linguistic forms and communicative practices that are valued in the learning environment. The findings may also be interpreted through the lens of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasises the importance of interaction and guided support in learning. Praise that is linked to successful language performance provides learners with meaningful feedback, enabling them to recognise effective language use and gradually internalise it through continued participation and practice. Although most teachers viewed praise positively, a small proportion expressed concerns about its potential limitations. Some participants suggested that praise may encourage learners to reproduce language forms without fully understanding them, while others believed that unclear or poorly targeted praise

could create confusion about appropriate language use. These responses support previous research suggesting that praise is most effective when it is specific, meaningful, and directly connected to learners' performance (Henderikx et al., 2017).

Overall, the results indicate that teachers perceive praise as an important instructional strategy that contributes to learners' understanding of legitimate English use while simultaneously supporting motivation and confidence. At the same time, the findings highlight that the educational value of praise depends on its quality and purpose. Praise that is carefully linked to learners' language performance appears more likely to promote meaningful learning than praise that is vague or unrelated to specific achievements.

In your experience, how does praise influence students' understanding of legitimate English usage? (For teachers)

37 responses

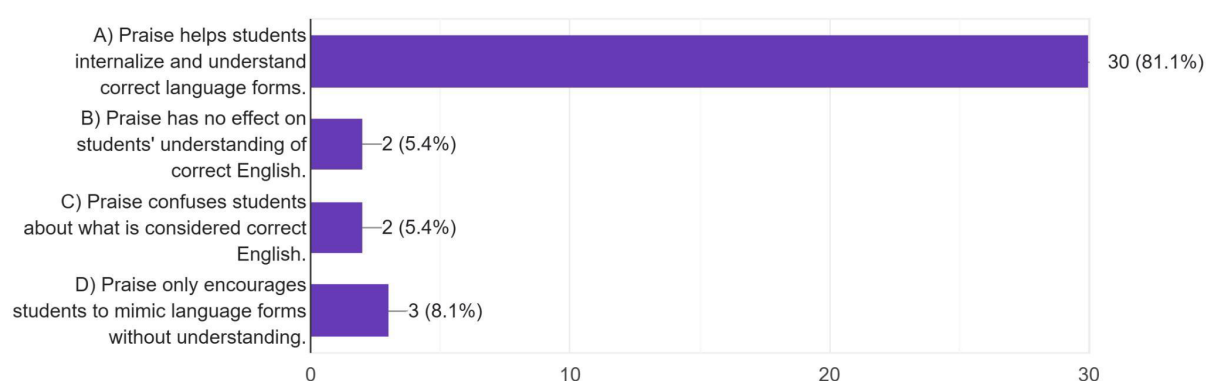


Table 3. Teachers' Perceptions of the Role of Praise in Developing Learners' Understanding of Legitimate English Use

6.4 Teachers' Approaches to Motivational Praise in Online English Learning

Teachers were asked how they ensure that praise remains motivating rather than demotivating in their online English courses. As shown in Figure 4, the majority of respondents, **83.8% (n = 31)**, reported that they provide specific and meaningful praise focused on students' progress. In contrast, **16.2% (n = 6)** indicated that they offer praise without consciously considering its motivational impact. A smaller proportion, **8.1% (n = 3)**, stated that they avoid praise to prevent learners from becoming dependent on external validation. None of the participants (**0%, n = 0**) reported giving praise based solely on performance rather than effort or improvement.

The findings indicate that most teachers recognise the importance of providing praise that supports learners' motivation and language development. By focusing on learners' progress rather than solely on outcomes, teachers appear to encourage continued engagement with learning and reinforce students' confidence in their developing language abilities. These

responses suggest that praise is generally viewed as a deliberate pedagogical strategy rather than simply a form of positive reinforcement.

The findings can be interpreted through the framework of Self Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which proposes that learners are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation when feedback supports their sense of competence and autonomy. Praise that acknowledges learners' effort, improvement, and progress is more likely to encourage sustained engagement with language learning than praise directed exclusively at performance or final achievement. The absence of responses indicating that teachers praise only performance suggests an awareness of the importance of promoting long term motivation rather than short term achievement.

At the same time, the results reveal some variation in teachers' approaches. A small proportion of respondents acknowledged that they provide praise without considering its motivational function, while others reported avoiding praise altogether because of concerns about learners becoming dependent on external validation. These responses reflect ongoing discussions in educational psychology regarding the potential limitations of praise when it is not used purposefully or is perceived as controlling (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Rather than suggesting that praise should be avoided, the findings indicate the importance of delivering feedback that is meaningful, specific, and closely connected to learners' progress.

Overall, the results demonstrate that teachers generally recognise the role of praise in supporting learner motivation within online English learning environments. They also suggest that the effectiveness of praise depends not only on its frequency but also on the way it is delivered. Praise that acknowledges effort, progress, and meaningful language development appears more likely to encourage sustained motivation and active engagement in learning.

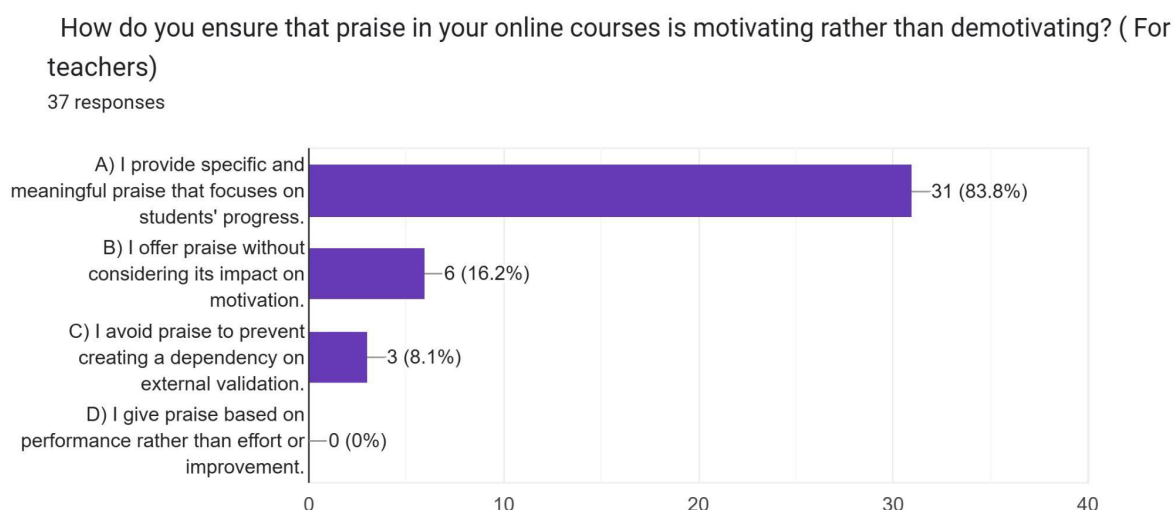


Table 4. Teachers' Strategies for Ensuring That Praise Supports Learner Motivation in Online English Learning

6.5 Praise as a Threat of Demotivation

Participants were asked whether praise in online English learning encourages learners to focus more on external rewards than on the learning process. As shown in Figure 5, **51.1% (n = 24)** believed that the effect depends on the type of praise provided. In contrast, **31.9% (n = 15)** reported that praise encourages learners to focus primarily on external rewards, while **21.3% (n = 10)** believed that praise helps learners remain focused on the learning process. Only **4.3% (n = 2)** indicated that praise has no effect on learners' motivational orientation.

The findings suggest that participants recognise the complex role of praise in online English learning. Rather than viewing praise as either entirely beneficial or harmful, most respondents believed that its effectiveness depends on how it is delivered. This indicates that learners and teachers are aware that praise can support motivation when it is meaningful and connected to learning, but may become less effective when it is perceived as a reward in itself. These findings can be interpreted through the framework of Self Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Praise that recognises learners' effort, improvement, and meaningful engagement is more likely to strengthen intrinsic motivation by supporting learners' sense of competence. Conversely, praise that focuses primarily on outcomes or external approval may encourage learners to seek validation rather than engage with language learning for its own value.

The responses of participants who believed that praise encourages learners to focus on external rewards are consistent with Kohn's (1993) argument that praise may function as a form of external reinforcement when it is used primarily to reward performance. Likewise, Dweck (2006) argues that praise directed towards effort and progress is more likely to promote a growth mindset than praise directed at fixed abilities. The fact that more than half of the participants believed the impact of praise depends on the type of feedback suggests an awareness that praise is most effective when it is purposeful, specific, and linked to meaningful learning.

From the perspective of Semantic Legitimation Code Theory (Maton, 2014), these findings also suggest that praise communicates which learning behaviours and language practices are recognised and valued within the educational context. Consequently, praise influences not only learners' motivation but also their understanding of what constitutes legitimate English use. When praise is closely connected to meaningful language performance, it encourages learners to value improvement and communicative competence rather than external approval alone.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that praise has a significant influence on learners' motivational orientation in online English learning. Its effectiveness depends less on the frequency of praise than on the way it is delivered and the learning behaviours it reinforces.

Purposeful praise appears to support both sustained motivation and learners' understanding of legitimate English use.

Does praise in online English learning make learners focus more on rewards than on the learning process?

47 responses

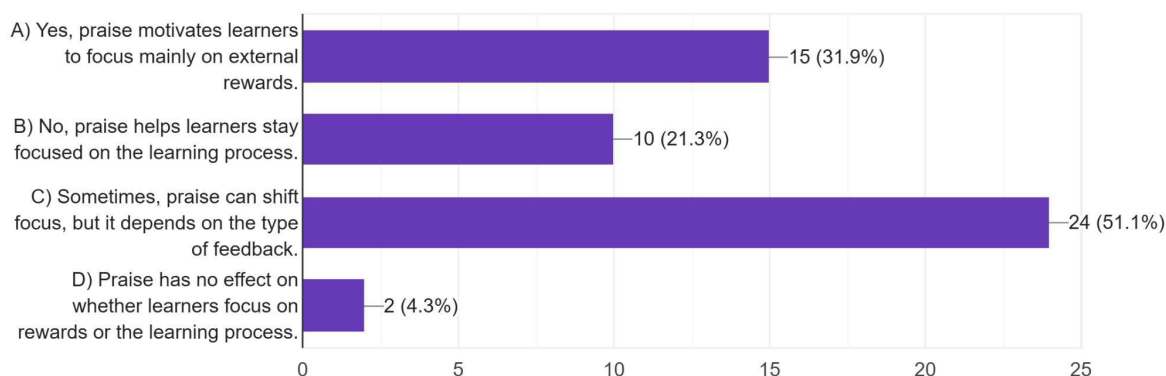


Table 5. Participants' Perceptions of the Influence of Praise on Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation in Online English Learning

6.6 Circumstances Under Which Praise Becomes Demotivating

In order to understand the conditions under which praise may negatively affect learner motivation and language development, participants were asked the following question: *"In your opinion, under what circumstances can praise become demotivating for students, and how might it negatively impact their learning process or motivation?"* The responses revealed several recurring themes that highlight both the benefits and potential limitations of praise in online English learning.

One participant stated,

"Constant praise for every small action, even when the effort or result is minimal, devalues genuine achievement. Students may become dependent on praise rather than developing internal motivation."

This finding supports Alfie Kohn's (1993) argument that excessive praise can lose its motivational value and encourage dependence on external approval. According to Self Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), this dependence may reduce learners' intrinsic motivation by shifting their focus from meaningful learning to receiving recognition from others. Similarly, Dweck (2006) argues that praise should reinforce effort and improvement rather than simply acknowledge performance. In online English learning environments, where

teacher feedback often serves as one of the main forms of interaction, routine or undeserved praise may gradually lose its educational value. Beyond highlighting the risks of excessive praise, this response also suggests that learners distinguish between praise that recognises meaningful progress and praise that is offered automatically. From the perspective of Semantic Legitimation Code Theory (Maton, 2014), praise loses its ability to communicate what constitutes successful and legitimate English use when it is no longer clearly connected to learners' language development.

Another participant remarked,

"In my opinion, when a teacher compares two students and highlights one student's improvements to another, it definitely will have a negative impact. Not only destroying student's motivation, moreover we create an unhealthy relationship between them. So, I consider such praise can become demotivating for students."

This response supports Deci and Ryan's (1985) view that learners require both relatedness and autonomy to remain motivated. When praise encourages comparison between students, it may reduce learners' sense of belonging and create feelings of inadequacy. Such effects may be particularly evident in online learning environments, where opportunities for informal interaction and emotional support are often more limited. The participant's response also suggests that praise influences classroom relationships as well as individual motivation. Rather than functioning only as personal feedback, praise contributes to the overall learning atmosphere and may shape learners' willingness to participate and use English confidently.

A further response observed,

"If the praise is not specified it can be confusing and demotivating. Moreover, sometimes students need to be challenged and be in a competitive environment to increase the motivation of learning. So, praise should be balanced and correctly chosen."

This response highlights the importance of providing clear and specific feedback while recognising that learners may respond differently to praise. Previous research suggests that vague praise offers little guidance regarding what learners have achieved or how they can continue to improve (Henderikx et al., 2017). In contrast, specific praise directed towards particular language skills or learning strategies helps learners recognise successful performance and maintain motivation (Bandura, 1997). The participant also emphasises that effective praise requires balance. Some learners may respond positively to competition, whereas others benefit more from cooperative learning environments, an observation that is consistent with research on achievement goals (Ames, 1992). These findings indicate that praise should be adapted to individual learners and learning contexts rather than applied uniformly.

One participant provided a more detailed reflection:

"I believe it depends on the form how the teacher gives feedback to her/his students, sometimes over-praising students might let them think that receiving positive feedback is more important than the actual learning process. If their focus shifts more on getting as much praise as possible, they miss the whole point of the lesson. Even though giving/receiving feedback is important, it is also necessary to know the dose of it. Also, students can get demotivated after hearing their classmates being praised more than them, so it is crucial for a teacher to know tricks to give every student praise individually according to their own needs."

This response brings together several important theoretical perspectives. Dweck (2006) argues that praise directed primarily towards outcomes rather than effort may encourage a fixed mindset, while Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory suggests that learners naturally evaluate their own performance by comparing themselves with others. The participant also highlights the importance of personalised feedback. Rather than distributing praise equally or excessively, teachers should recognise learners' individual progress and achievements. This response demonstrates that participants viewed effective praise as equitable rather than identical, recognising that learners have different motivational needs and respond differently to feedback. Such findings reinforce the importance of individualised praise in promoting both motivation and positive perceptions of language learning.

Another participant succinctly noted,

"Praise can become a source of demotivation when it is overly general, undeserved, leads to dependence on external recognition, or causes comparison with others. In such cases, the student either fails to recognize their progress or loses interest in learning. Praise should be specific and focused on progress in order to strengthen motivation."

This response reinforces several of the themes identified throughout the study. It highlights the principles of formative assessment by demonstrating that praise should be meaningful, specific, and directly related to learners' progress (Black & Wiliam, 1998). When praise is too general or disconnected from actual achievement, learners may struggle to identify their strengths and areas for improvement. The participant also suggests that effective praise encourages learners to reflect on their own development rather than simply seeking approval from others. This finding is particularly relevant in online learning environments, where learners often rely on self-regulation to monitor their own progress (Zimmerman, 2002).

One contributor expanded on the emotional dimension of praise:

"Praise can become demotivating when it's excessive, vague, or not genuine. If students are praised for minimal effort, they might stop challenging themselves. It can also create pressure to always succeed, leading to fear of failure. For teachers, it might cause them to overlook real progress or struggle."

This observation illustrates that praise may unintentionally increase learners' anxiety when it creates expectations that are difficult to maintain. Research on achievement motivation (Elliot & Dweck, 1988) suggests that excessive emphasis on performance can contribute to fear of failure and discourage learners from taking intellectual risks. In language learning, where experimentation and making mistakes are essential components of development (Lightbown & Spada, 2013), such pressure may reduce learners' willingness to communicate. The participant's response also suggests that authenticity is an important characteristic of effective praise. Learners appear to value praise that is sincere, proportionate, and clearly linked to genuine achievement rather than routine encouragement.

Finally, a participant remarked,

"When not enough constructive criticism is applied, if you get praised only, what's the point of actually learning, you'll think 'I'm doing good anyway' and move on."

This response highlights the importance of balancing praise with constructive feedback. Praise alone may encourage satisfaction with current performance without encouraging further development, whereas constructive feedback helps learners recognise opportunities for improvement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Rather than viewing praise and corrective feedback as separate practices, participants perceived them as complementary components of effective teaching. This finding suggests that praise is most beneficial when it is integrated into a broader feedback process that both recognises achievement and supports continued language development.

Taken together, these responses demonstrate that participants do not reject praise as a pedagogical strategy. Instead, they consistently emphasise that its effectiveness depends on how it is delivered, how frequently it is used, and how closely it is connected to learners' progress. Across the responses, participants valued praise that was specific, meaningful, authentic, and individualised, while expressing concerns about praise that was excessive, vague, or based on comparison with others. These findings suggest that praise functions not only as a motivational strategy but also as a mechanism through which learners interpret expectations, evaluate their own progress, and develop their understanding of legitimate English use in online learning environments.

6.7. Implications

The findings of this study have several implications for educators involved in online English language teaching. First, they highlight the importance of providing praise that is specific, genuine, and focused on learners' effort, progress, and language development rather than solely on final outcomes. Such feedback is more likely to promote a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) and strengthen intrinsic motivation by supporting learners' sense of competence and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These qualities are particularly important for sustaining long term engagement and fostering independent language learning.

The findings also suggest that teachers should be mindful of the emotional impact of praise. Excessive, vague, or comparative praise may unintentionally reduce motivation,

increase performance anxiety, or encourage dependence on external approval (Kohn, 1993). In contrast, praise that is meaningful, balanced, and accompanied by constructive feedback enables learners to recognise both their achievements and the areas that require further development (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This balanced approach is especially valuable in online learning environments, where limited face to face interaction places greater importance on the clarity and quality of teacher feedback.

The study also offers practical implications for curriculum developers and instructional designers. Online English language programmes should incorporate feedback practices that encourage meaningful learning rather than simply rewarding performance. Whether feedback is delivered by teachers, peers, or digital learning systems, it should provide specific guidance that supports learners' continued development and understanding of legitimate English use. In addition, professional development opportunities should equip teachers with effective strategies for delivering praise that promotes both motivation and language learning.

Finally, the findings emphasise the importance of recognising individual differences among learners. Since students vary in their motivational needs, confidence, and learning preferences, feedback practices should remain flexible and responsive to individual circumstances. Adopting a more personalised approach to praise may contribute to greater learner engagement, stronger self-confidence, and more effective language development in diverse online English learning environments.

7. Conclusion

This study explored how praise and reinforcement affect student motivation and meaningful English use in online learning, focusing particularly on Georgian students. The research offers practical insights for online English educators in Georgia and similar contexts. The findings show that praise can be a powerful tool to enhance confidence and support correct language use but only when used thoughtfully. When praise is specific, sincere, and focused on effort and progress, it encourages a growth mindset and keeps students motivated. In contrast, vague or overly frequent

Praise especially when it compares students can increase anxiety, create dependence on external approval, and distract from actual learning.

The study also found that teachers' beliefs and habits around praise play a key role in shaping how students engage with English and understand what "good" language use means. This is especially important in online settings, where meaningful feedback is harder to deliver. Georgian educators, like others, need clear, research-based strategies that help them balance encouragement with constructive feedback to support student growth without creating pressure or competition.

Overall, this research deepens our understanding of what drives motivation in online English learning among Georgian students. It offers practical insights for teachers aiming to use praise more effectively. Online English programs in Georgia can better support students' language development and long-term success by creating a feedback culture that values effort, progress, and learner independence.

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ავტორის შესახებ:

ნინო პაპუნაშვილმა ლექსიკოგრაფიის სამაგისტრო პროგრამა თბილისის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტში დაასრულა. მან ამავე უნივერსიტეტში მიიღო ბაკალავრის ხარისხი ინგლისურ ფილოლოგიაში. ბაკალავრიატის პერიოდში იგი მონაწილეობდა Erasmus+ გაცვლით პროგრამაში სანტიაგო დე კომპოსტელას უნივერსიტეტში (ესპანეთი), ხოლო მოგვიანებით, მაგისტრატურაზე სწავლის პერიოდში, Erasmus+ პროგრამის ფარგლებში სწავლობდა ლისაბონის

უნივერსიტეტში (პორტუგალია). ამჟამად მუშაობს სკოლაში ინგლისური ენის მასწავლებლად.

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სამადლობელი

მსურს, გულწრფელი მადლობა გადავუხადო ქალბატონ ნატო ფერაძეს ამ სტატიის რედაქტირებისა და გადამუშავების პროცესში გაწეული ფასდაუდებელი დახმარებისთვის, მნიშვნელოვანი უკუკავშირისა და რეკომენდაციებისთვის. მისმა რჩევებმა და შემოთავაზებებმა მნიშვნელოვანი წვლილი შეიტანა ნაშრომის გაუმჯობესებასა და დახვეწაში.

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