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From Punitive to Supportive: Exploring the Role of Positive Reinforcement in Student Engagement among Junior High School Students

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ABSTRACT

In many educational contexts, classroom disciplinary practices are often dominated by punitive approaches, in which mistakes are responded to criticism or punishment in the name of maintaining order and discipline. Such practices may discourage participation, reduce students' confidence, and limit meaningful engagement, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning where students are already vulnerable to anxiety and fear of making mistakes. However, alternative approaches that emphasize support rather than punishment remain underexplored, especially in relation to their broader impact on classroom dynamics. Grounded in Behaviourist theory by Skinner, this study investigates whether and how Positive Reinforcement enhances student engagement in EFL classrooms. A sequential explanatory mixed-method design was employed involving 105 junior high school students in Indonesia. Quantitative data were collected through pre- and post-surveys, followed by qualitative interviews with five students to further explain the statistical findings. The quantitative results showed a statistically significant improvement in students' engagement ($p < .001$) after the implementation of Positive Reinforcement, with a large effect size ($r = 0.86$), indicating a strong practical impact. The qualitative findings further revealed improvements in five major areas: (1) behavioural engagement, (2) cognitive engagement, (3) emotional safety and confidence, (4) peer interaction and communication, and (5) student-teacher relationships. These findings suggest that shifting from punitive to supportive practices not only enhances individual student engagement but also contributes to the development of more positive and supportive classroom dynamics in EFL learning environments.

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1. Introduction

According to the Indonesian Child Commission (*Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia*—KPAI), a significant amount of reported violence, on behalf of disciplinary punishment, against children occurs in the educational environment, implying that students are vulnerable to physical and psychological harm in school (Imran, 2024; Pramono & Dwiyanti Hanandini, 2022). Punitive disciplinary practices, including physical and verbal forms of punishment, remain present in some educational environments and are justified as means of controlling classroom order (Noer et al., 2021). In Indonesia, such practice are still frequently traceable in schools, where some teachers express physical punishment such as *pinching*, *kicking*, *hitting*, or other similar actions to *discipline* the students (Muis, 2017) and verbal "punishment" violently, such as labelling the students as stupid, yelling, shaming, and other similar forms when students fail to meet teachers' academic or behavioural expectations (Murdiawan & Usman, 2025; Yusri et al., 2025).

One of the researchers, during a teaching experience placement in an Indonesian Junior high school, found that teachers still used those punishments toward students who failed to answer questions correctly; a similar case was also observed where the class is out of discipline (silent in order). Assumptively, in many Indonesian classrooms, teacher-centred authority and disciplinary traditions often legitimate punitive disciplinary practices as a rightful, effective, and *legal* method to be implemented in ordering students' behaviour, and it is a mundane culture within classrooms (Nasution et al., 2025), which consequently stimulates negative effects, especially on the students. Some research shows that a learning environment filled with pressure and fear potentially vivifies apathy, intensifies anxiety, and demotivates students from participating in learning participation (Poudel, 2022). These disruptive potentials affect not only psychologically, but also academically and socially, such as disengagement in learning, self-insecurity, and limited interaction (Fung et al., 2023; Rahimi & Karkami, 2015).

These concerns outspread beyond isolated *episodes* of teacher violence to a wider pedagogical question regarding how teachers normalise student behaviour and participation in classroom situations. Within the framework of operant conditioning (Skinner, 1965), classroom management can be envisaged through two complementary behavioural strategies: *punishment*, which purposes to manage undesirable behaviours, and *reinforcement*, which purposes to strengthen desirable behaviours. Although punitive discipline may manufacture instantaneous compliance, an emergent body of research suggests that it often undermines, and even jeopardises, students' mental security, internal motivation, and alacrity to participate, especially in language classrooms where communication inherently involves vulnerability and the possibility of making mistakes. Students already face challenges such as fear of making mistakes, grammatical complexity, and anxiety over negative evaluation. Lestari et al. (2023) emphasised that these factors discourage students from using English actively. Rahimi & Karkami (2015), further demonstrated that corrective feedback delivered in a harsh manner amplifies speaking anxiety and prevents students from practicing the language. In this context, teachers do not merely transfer knowledge but also craft a dynamic classroom. Therefore, plummeting the fear intensity encourages participation, and it is particularly important in an EFL learning environment.

Classroom dynamics refer to the patterns of interaction, emotion, participation, and relationships that construct the learning environment (Reyes et al., 2012). Classroom dynamics are particularly vital in EFL classrooms because language learning demands active interaction, communication, and participation among students and teachers. It is meticulously tied to the level of student engagement (Wang et al., 2021). A positive classroom can be characterised by inclusivity and support, which tighten up collaboration and participation (Havik & Westergård, 2020). Fredricks, et al. (2004) proposed engagement into three dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement. These dimensions are not only influenced by instructional content but are also scaffolded by how teachers react and respond to students' behaviours and efforts in the classroom. This is what is meant by positive reinforcement. It is not just a mere positive wording; it extends beyond an alternative classroom technique; it is a theoretically grounded pedagogical approach promoting desired behaviours through encouragement, recognition, and supportive feedback. The crucial question, therefore, is no longer whether punishment is detrimental, but whether reinforcement can support and cultivate sustainable engagement in EFL learning.

In this research, communication between student and teacher is, additionally, examined as wider manifestations of engagement. These aspects are considered outcomes of students' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement in communicating confidently and developing positive interpersonal relationships in the classroom (Marshalina, 2025). Because students' engagement is intensely influenced by classroom responses and interactions, teachers' reinforcement strategies become important in shaping how students behave, participate, and interact in the learning process. From a behaviourist perspective, operant conditioning theory, the research focuses on positive reinforcement because it aligns with human nature and is more motivating than pressure (Miu et al., 2017). Studies show that appreciation, such as praise and recognition, can significantly increase students' internal motivation, which affects their participation and activeness in class, and punishment only results in short-term compliance and causes adverse effects such as anxiety disorders and decreased self-esteem (Rabbani & Husain, 2024).

Previous studies have shown that positive reinforcement improves student motivation and academic achievement (Aulia & Jamilah, 2024; Dewi & Sari, 2023; Gaffar et al., 2022; Mahendra, 2024; Yoon et al., 2024). However, these studies only focus on quantitative data and academic results, thus failing to explore students' perspectives on positive reinforcement during the learning process. Moreover, studies by Bhatti et al. (2021), Do & Vu (2021), Nurdiana et al. (2021), and Pasaribu (2022) have successfully captured students' perceptions of positive reinforcement practices, particularly in improving self-motivation, personal behaviour, and learning engagement. Nevertheless, limited attention has been paid to its broader social function in shaping a positive classroom culture where students and teachers collectively foster mutual appreciation, support, and a healthy learning environment. Studies by Fitriati et al. (2020), Jensen (2022), and Macalisang & Bonghawan (2024) have mapped positive reinforcement strategies used by teachers, and how positive reinforcement improves students' academic results, but does not examine its effects on students' engagement and classroom dynamics. Studies by Arista et al. (2018) and Maisarah (2024) found that positive reinforcement has a positive impact on student activity in the classroom. However, the object of this research was young learners; therefore, research with teenage or adult students as the

object is needed to find out how this approach is applied to students with more complex emotions and psychological conditions.

Several studies by Samodra et al. (2021), Dewi & Sari (2023), Gaffar et al. (2022), Sari & Rahmani (2024), Ashour & Almgharbi (2026) focus on how positive reinforcement enhances students' language skills such as speaking, reading, writing, and reading, but there is still a limited number of studies that focus on how positive reinforcement creates a safer and more comfortable learning environment, thereby enabling students to thrive in the learning process. Furthermore, previous studies have proven that students who are emotionally engaged and feel psychologically safe are more willing to communicate, collaborate, and build positive relationships within the classroom (Côté-Lussier & Fitzpatrick, 2016; Tu, 2021). Building on Fredricks, et al. (2004) conceptualized engagement, this study also considers communication and student-teacher relations as important manifestations of positive classroom dynamics that may emerge when students experience high levels of behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Thus, student-teacher communication and relationships in this study are not merely positioned as additional variables but as outcomes of student engagement that develops optimally through the application of positive reinforcement. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how supportive teaching practices not only enhance individual engagement but also transform the overall classroom dynamics. While previous studies have contributed valuable insights into positive reinforcement, several limitations remain. Most studies rarely conceptualize positive reinforcement as a mechanism for transforming classroom culture and interpersonal dynamics. Existing research predominantly evaluates academic outcomes, leaving its potential role in fostering emotional security, communication, and student-teacher relationships insufficiently understood. Therefore, to address the gap, this study examines: 1) the role of positive reinforcement in shaping classroom dynamics and 2) fostering supportive classroom culture in EFL learning.

This distinction becomes predominantly vital in EFL classrooms, where students often experience fear of making mistakes, limited language proficiency, and anxiety about negative evaluation. Because language learning requires students to take communicative risks, classroom responses that underline punishment may further intensify anxiety in participation, whereas supportive reinforcement may craft the emotional security for active engagement. Therefore, reinforcement practices that encourage participation rather than mere compliance are especially relevant in EFL contexts, as they may foster not only students' motivation to communicate but also their cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement in the learning process.

2. Literature Review

Primarily, this study is grounded in behaviourist theory through the concept of operant conditioning proposed by Skinner (1965), which emphasizes that behaviour can be shaped through consequences. Additionally, this study also draws on the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which explains the role of emotional factors in language learning (Krashen, 1982). To understand classroom interactions, the study also employs the sociocultural perspective, which highlights the importance of the social environment in the learning process (Miller, 2002). By integrating these three theories, this study aims to explain how positive reinforcement can influence students' behaviour, emotions, and interactions during learning.

2.1 Operant Conditioning Theory

This study is based on the behaviourist theory proposed by Skinner (1965), who views learning as an observable change in behaviour resulting from an individual's interaction with their environment. Within this framework, the theory of operant conditioning explains that behaviour can be shaped and maintained through the consequences that follow it (Skinner, 1965). Skinner identified three primary mechanisms: positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, and punishment. Positive reinforcement refers to the provision of a positive stimulus to strengthen desired behaviour, while negative reinforcement involves the removal of an aversive stimulus to encourage specific behaviour.

Conversely, punishment is used to suppress undesired behaviour through negative consequences (Skinner, 1965). Among these three mechanisms, positive reinforcement is considered the most effective and sustainable approach because it encourages the repetition of positive behaviour through pleasant experiences, rather than through fear or pressure (Wang et al., 2021). Within the context of EFL learning, operant conditioning provides a theoretical foundation to comprehend how teachers' classroom responses drive students' learning behaviours. Among the behavioural mechanisms proposed by Skinner, positive reinforcement encompasses beyond merely mounting desirable behaviours; it also constructs students' emotional and cognitive responses by fostering encouragement, confidence, and participation. Consequently, positive reinforcement can be envisaged as the behavioural mechanism through which supportive classroom interactions promote engagement. This theoretical contemplation provides the conceptual basis for examining positive reinforcement as a pedagogical strategy for enhancing engagement in EFL classrooms.

2.2 Positive Reinforcement in Educational Context

In the field of education, positive reinforcement has been widely used as a strategy to promote *desired* learning behaviours. This approach emphasizes the provision of appreciation, positive feedback, and recognition of students' efforts as a means of fostering intrinsic motivation and engagement. Positive reinforcement can be delivered through various forms, including praise, encouragement, effort recognition, positive feedback, and rewards (Fitriati et al., 2020).

Some research indicates positive reinforcement fosters more sustainable motivation and boosts students' self-confidence (Miu et al., 2017; Rabbani & Husain, 2024). Furthermore, teachers play a crucial role as facilitators who not only deliver content but also create a supportive learning environment through emotional and social support (Flavia & Enachi-Vasluianu, 2016).

Those findings emphasise that positive reinforcement serves as a behaviour management device and a pedagogical strategy that contributes to fostering a positive classroom atmosphere. Building upon the principles of operant conditioning, positive reinforcement functions as a behavioural intervention and a pedagogical approach that supports students' active involvement in learning. These supportive interactions encourage students to participate more actively, and as a result, positive reinforcement is theoretically linked to student engagement, as it strengthens the behavioural, emotional, and cognitive proportions of students' participation in EFL classrooms.

2.3 Affective Filter Hypothesis

In the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL), positive reinforcement plays an increasingly crucial role. EFL learners typically face various challenges, such as a fear of making mistakes, limited language proficiency, and anxiety about negative evaluation (Sudarmanto et al., 2023). According to Krashen (1982), high levels of anxiety can hinder the language acquisition process by blocking the intake of meaningful input. In this context, positive reinforcement can lower the affective filter by fostering a sense of safety, appreciation, and support (Chen, 2020). Research by Lestari et al. (2023) indicates that students tend to be passive due to fear of making mistakes; however, when teachers acknowledge their efforts, students' courage to communicate increases. Additionally, research by Gaffar & Makassar (2022) found that positive reinforcement significantly contributes to improvements in students' writing skills and self-confidence within the EFL context in Indonesia. Thus, positive reinforcement not only serves to reinforce behaviour but also acts as a strategy to reduce anxiety and enhance students' communicative competence.

2.4 Classroom Dynamics and Sociocultural Theory

Classroom dynamics refer to the social interactions that occur between teachers and students, as well as among students during the learning process (Gest et al., 2014). This perspective can be understood through sociocultural theory, which argues that learning is fundamentally a social process shaped through interaction in communities (Vygotsky, 1978). From this perspective, teachers do not merely transmit knowledge but also create social conditions that influence how students participate, communicate, and build positive connections during learning. In this context, student engagement serves as a key indicator of learning quality. Fredricks, et al. (2004) propose that student engagement comprises three primary dimensions: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive. These three dimensions are influenced by the learning environment, including how teachers respond to students' behaviour and efforts. As it is pointed, operant conditioning explains how teachers' responses stimulate students' observable behaviours. In EFL contexts, student engagement is the consequence of both behavioural reinforcement and socially mediated learning experiences, underlining the harmonising roles of behaviourist and sociocultural perspectives in explaining students' participation in EFL classrooms.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, in which quantitative data is collected and analysed first, followed by qualitative data to explain and deepen the findings. According to Creswell (2014), this design allows researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding by combining statistically measurable results with participants' subjective experiences. In this study, quantitative analysis was used to examine changes in students' engagement following the implementation of positive reinforcement, while qualitative data were used to explain how students interpreted and experienced the intervention. Although this design does not permit strong causal inferences, it was considered appropriate for examining changes associated with the intervention and providing complementary insights through qualitative findings. Accordingly, the findings

are interpreted as changes following at the intervention rather than definitive evidence of causality.

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were 105 eighth-grade students (aged 13-14 years) from a junior high school in Indonesia with beginner-level English proficiency. All students participated in the quantitative phase, while five students were purposively selected for interviews in the qualitative phase; participant selection was intentionally designed to provide explanatory insights into the quantitative findings rather than to achieve broad representativeness. Selection was based on classroom observations to represent variations in student characteristics, namely: (1) uninterested and inactive, (2) uninterested but active, (3) struggling and disengaged, (4) interested but passive, and (5) interested and active. The number of interview participants was considered sufficient to capture varied perspectives regarding the implementation of positive reinforcement in English language learning.

3.3 Instruments

The positive reinforcement intervention was implemented by the researcher as an English teacher over four months (approximately 20 sessions) during regular English language instruction. Positive reinforcement was consistently applied in several strategies, including verbal praise ("Good job," "Great effort"), supportive feedback, appreciation for effort, simple rewards (stickers or points), and special encouragement for students facing difficulties. Reinforcement was provided not only for academic aspects but also for classroom behaviours such as punctuality, neatness, participation, and the courage to speak in English. This intervention is based on the principle of positive reinforcement in behaviourist theory as proposed by Skinner.

This study utilized two instruments. In the quantitative phase, a one-group pre-survey and post-survey questionnaires with a five-point Likert scale were used to measure five dimensions of student engagement: behavioural, cognitive, emotional, communication, and student-teacher relationship. The questionnaire consisted of 25 items distributed across five dimensions: behavioural engagement (5 items), cognitive engagement (5 items), emotional engagement (5 items), communication and interaction (5 items), and student-teacher relationship (5 items). These instruments were developed based on the theoretical framework of student engagement by Fredricks, et al. (2004) and further refined to align with the research focus discussed in the previous literature review. The questionnaire was theoretically operationalized to ensure that each dimension of student engagement was appropriately represented by the corresponding questionnaire items. The development process involved adapting the theoretical constructs of student engagement to the context of English language learning and positive reinforcement in higher education.

In the qualitative phase, a semi-structured interview guide was used to explore students' experiences regarding the application of positive reinforcement. All instruments underwent a validation process by experts in the fields of English language education, pedagogy, and psychology. The data collection procedure was carried out in four stages: (1) administration of a pre-survey, (2) implementation of the intervention over four months, (3) administration of a post-survey, and (4) in-depth interviews with five selected students. The intervention was implemented consistently across approximately twenty classroom meetings over a four-month period and was integrated into regular English classroom activities. Following

Fitriati et al. (2020), five forms of positive reinforcement were employed throughout the intervention period, namely praise, encouragement, effort recognition, positive feedback, and rewards. These forms of reinforcement were consistently implemented across all sessions to acknowledge students' effort, participation, and learning progress throughout classroom activities, rather than solely emphasizing correct answers or academic achievement. The English teacher implemented all reinforcement strategies throughout the intervention period to maintain procedural consistency.

Table 1. Forms of Positive Reinforcement and the Purpose of Implementation

Forms of Positive Reinforcement	Purpose of Implementation	Examples of Implementation
Praise	To acknowledge students' accomplishments, participation, and learning progress	Verbal praise such as "Good Job!", "Cool!", "Well done!" and etc.
Encouragement	To motivate students to persist and actively engage in learning activities	Motivational statements such as "Nail it!", "You can do it!", "Keep trying!", and etc.
Effort Recognition	To appreciate students' perseverance and learning efforts	Statement such as "Nice try!", "Wow, such an improvement!", "Good effort!", and etc.
Positive Feedback	To support students' improvement through constructive responses	Supportive feedback such as "any ideas?", "Good answer", "Please add more opinion", "Let's make it better". And etc.
Rewards	To appreciate students' engagement and positive contributions during learning activities	Give stars, stickers, applause, and etc.

Positive reinforcement was provided contingently in response to students' participation, effort, and learning progress during classroom activities. The implementation emphasized meaningful appreciation of students' learning process and aimed to foster a supportive and responsive learning environment.

3.4 Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted by combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS through descriptive statistics and normality tests. Furthermore, comparisons between pre-test and post-test scores were analysed using a paired-samples t-test, or the Wilcoxon test if the data were not normally distributed, with a significance level of $p < 0.05$. An effect size calculation using the formula $r = Z / \sqrt{N}$ was also conducted to determine the practical significance of the intervention. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim prior to analysis. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis based on the six stages outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006) to identify recurring themes related to students' experiences of positive reinforcement. The coding and theme development processes were conducted collaboratively by the primary researcher and the co-researcher to enhance the credibility and consistency of the qualitative findings. Data integration was undertaken during the interpretation stage, where qualitative findings were used to explain and reinforce the quantitative results.

3.5 Data Validation

All instruments underwent a validation process by three experts in the fields of English language education, pedagogy, and psychology. The expert validation process evaluated the relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of each item in the questionnaire with respect to the intended theoretical constructs. Revisions were subsequently made based on the experts' suggestions to improve item wording and contextual suitability prior to data collection. Construct validity was theoretically grounded in the multidimensional framework of student engagement proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004). The five dimensions were systematically operationalized into questionnaire items to guarantee conceptual correspondence between the intended constructs and their empirical representation. The instrument subsequently underwent expert validation.

To ensure qualitative trustworthiness, member checking was conducted to confirm the accuracy of participants' responses, while peer debriefing was undertaken during the coding and interpretation processes to minimize potential bias and strengthen the credibility of the findings. Reliability testing was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha to examine the internal consistency of questionnaire items. The results showed that the instrument achieved a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of $\alpha \geq 0.81$, indicating a good level of reliability and satisfactory internal consistency for measuring students' engagement following the intervention. This study also addressed ethical considerations. All participants voluntarily participated in the study after receiving information regarding the study's objectives, the right to withdraw at any time, and assurances of data confidentiality. Research permission was also obtained from the school administration.

4. Results

4.1. Improvement of Classroom Dynamics Following Positive Reinforcement

In the Findings section, summarize the collected data and the analysis performed on those data relevant to the issue that is to follow. The Findings should be clear and concise. It should be written objectively and factually, and without expressing personal opinion. It includes numbers, tables, and figures (e.g., charts and graphs). Number tables and figures consecutively in accordance with their appearance in the text.

The quantitative findings indicate a significant increase in student engagement following the implementation of positive reinforcement. The average score rose from 31.84 on the pre-test to 78.78 on the post-test, indicating a significant improvement in overall classroom dynamics. This represents an increase of 46.94 points, suggesting a substantial improvement in students' engagement after the intervention.

Table 2: Table of Quantitative Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-test	105	22	81	31.84	10.969
post -test	97	67	85	78.78	2.623
Valid N (listwise)	97				

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the pre-test and post-test scores. The pre-test involved 105 participants, with scores ranging from 22 to 81 (M = 31.84, SD = 10.97). The post-test, however, included only 97 participants because several students were absent on the

testing day, resulting in fewer valid cases. Scores in the post-test ranged from 67 to 85 (M = 78.78, SD = 2.62). The valid number of paired cases across both tests was 97. Therefore, only the 97 matched responses were included in the inferential statistical analysis.

Table 3: Table of Normality Test Results

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]		
	Statistic	Df	Sig.
Pre-test	.268	97	.000
post -test	.151	97	.000

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Prior to hypothesis testing, a normality test using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed that the data were not normally distributed ($p < 0.05$). Therefore, the non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test was used to analyze the difference between pre-test and post-test scores.

Table 4: Table of Analysis Results on pre and post-survey

Test Statistics[a]	
	post - pre survey
Z	-8.515[b]
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test	

b. Based on negative ranks.

The test results showed a statistically significant difference ($Z = -8.515$; $p < 0.001$), meaning that the application of positive reinforcement had a significant effect on student engagement. To determine the strength of this effect, an effect size calculation was performed using the formula $r = Z / \sqrt{N}$, yielding a result of $r = 0.86$. This value falls into the category of a large effect, indicating that positive reinforcement is not only statistically significant but also has a strong practical impact on student engagement.

Further analysis of each engagement dimension revealed consistent improvements. Behavioural engagement ($Z = -8.512$; $p < 0.001$) increased as students' active participation in learning activities grew. Cognitive engagement ($Z = -8.590$; $p < 0.001$) showed an increase in students' cognitive effort and intellectual engagement. Emotional engagement ($Z = -8.573$; $p < 0.001$) also increased, marked by students' sense of comfort and self-confidence in the classroom.

Additionally, engagement in communication and interaction ($Z = -8.592$; $p < 0.001$) increased, indicating that students became more willing to express their opinions, ask questions, and interact with peers and teachers. The relationship between students and teachers ($Z = -8.463$; $p < 0.001$) also showed a significant improvement, reflecting a more positive, trusting, and respectful relationship. Among the five dimensions, all showed statistically significant improvement, indicating that the impact of positive reinforcement extended beyond academic participation and influenced students' emotional experiences, communication patterns, and interpersonal relationships within the classroom.

In conclusion, these findings answer the first research question by demonstrating that positive reinforcement significantly enhances classroom dynamics through increased

student engagement across various dimensions: behavioural, cognitive, emotional, and social interactions.

4.2. Students' Perceptions of Positive Reinforcement in Classroom Dynamics

Interview data revealed that Positive Reinforcement affects the improvement of class dynamics by creating a safe, attractive, and mutually supportive environment. The responses of five students showed how this practice, such as symbolic praise, encouragement, and rewards, can shape various aspects of classroom life such as student behaviour, peer interaction, emotional safety, and teacher-student relationships. This analysis identifies five key elements where class dynamics are affected positively.

4.2.1 Create a safe and supportive atmosphere

One of the most prominent positive reinforcement effects is how this strategy can make students feel emotionally secure and supported in the classroom. Some students who were previously afraid or hesitant to participate in discussions, ask questions, or pitch ideas feel more valued when teachers support and acknowledge their efforts.

A student explained, "Usually, many teachers come to the class to repeat the *same thing*" (R1). When the student was asked to elaborate on the meaning of it, the student stated, "They come to the class, explain the lesson, give the assignment, and ask the students to answer the questions on the board. If we can find the right answer, the teacher rarely gives the appreciation, just okay this answer is right. When the answer is wrong, teachers sometimes assume we are not paying attention. I hate it, and I never want to try to answer" (R1). Then the student explained more, "But when my teacher appreciates me, I feel motivated to do my best, and I am not afraid to try or ask the question if I do not know. English is hard for me, and I often make mistakes, but I do not feel afraid or ashamed because my teacher always helps me to understand it" (R1). This quote exposes how emotional support makes the classroom safe and comfortable for growth. Where students process, feel supported, and without being judged.

A similar opinion is also expressed by another student who also said, "I used to be quiet during the class; I was afraid to ask and judged by other classmates if I did not understand the lesson well. Since my teacher supports me and is willing to help me, I feel more comfortable in class. I feel happy when I am complimented; I feel less ashamed to try and feel more confident" (R3). Judgemental is a characteristic of the classroom situation, and it is exacerbated by the mocks, insults, and parodies. R3 carried on, "I am afraid of being mocked, yeah, they laugh, but I don't feel it is funny. So, I pretend to laugh, but I am actually (feeling) unhappy" (R3). This feeling is also experienced by another participant who confessed that being a student with less capacity is a horrendous thing, "every time the teacher asks, I hide myself, I don't want to be pointed to answer ... it is terrible (the result after answering the wrong answer)" (R2). Both of the agree that when the teacher provides something comfort, without intensifying stress. They can slowly answer and show up, "We want something calmer, if we are wrong, it should not be a mock" (R3) and "when things are going wrong, I am happy if someone says, it is okay" (R2).

Based on the results of these fragments of the interviews, it can be concluded that positive reinforcement decreases emotional obstacles such as fear and low self-confidence. These interview results are collective data that show positive reinforcement can make students feel

comfortable and supported so that they are more courageous to try and more confident in the classroom.

4.2.2 Increase Student Engagement and Participation

Interviews also show that Positive Reinforcement is able to improve students' ability to actively participate in the classroom. Students who are initially reluctant to be active in the classroom begin to want to contribute more when they receive consistent support.

One student shared, "I was not very interested in English. I do not know; I think English is more complicated than math. Most of the time, I waited for other students' answers, but when my teacher asked me to do the quiz on the board, I made a mistake because I didn't know the right answer, but instead of being angry, my teacher helps me slowly, I feel valued and not feel ashamed. I keep trying to speak English, try to join the discussion, and join the game or quiz. I often make mistakes, but my teacher never gets angry and explains it again" (R2).

Another student stated, "Since my teacher gives me appreciation and support, I became more active and dared to try in class. I try to answer the quizzes and give my opinion in discussions in class. When I want to try, my teacher helps me how to find the correct answer" (R1). R3 emphasised, "appreciation matter. I know I am not good enough, but I want to learn, but I am really excited if someone (the teacher) supports me, not insults me. How can I understand if I am under pressure as if a bad thing will slap me" (R3). These findings highlight how appreciation and support from teachers can increase student motivation to create a dynamic and participatory classroom environment.

Overall, the findings advocate that positive reinforcement goes beyond encouraging students to participate more frequently; it also transforms the quality of their classroom engagement. Rather than participating out of obligation or fear of making mistakes, students become more willing to express ideas, respond to questions, and engage in collaborative learning because they perceive the classroom as a supportive and non-threatening environment. This shift indicates that consistent appreciation, constructive feedback, and emotional support foster a sense of psychological safety, enabling students to take academic risks and actively contribute to learning activities. Consequently, Positive Reinforcement functions not merely as a motivational strategy but also as a pedagogical approach that promotes meaningful student engagement and sustained classroom participation.

4.2.3 Reduces Tension and fear of making mistakes.

Positive reinforcement also helps reduce fears that prevent students from answering, asking questions, or engaging in discussions in class. Instead of being punished and criticized negatively, students who remain supported and appreciated even when they make mistakes will make students feel valued in the learning process.

One student explained, "When the teacher encourages me, I feel inspired to keep going" (R2). In addition, a student said that when She made a pronunciation mistake in class during speaking practice, she said, "I feel happy and not afraid to learn because when I make a mistake, the teacher reminds me in a good way" (R4). The statement relates to another student's statement, "Even though I make mistakes in my answer, my teacher doesn't get angry; she reminds me and helps me. I feel happy because of that. I used to feel afraid when stating my answer in class, so I am just being silent during English lessons. I used to be afraid

of my teacher's judgements if it is wrong, but now I am braver to try" (R5). Instead of seeing mistakes as weaknesses, students begin to see them as opportunities to improve and grow. This shift in perspective makes the classroom a comfortable and non-judgmental room. Students are not afraid to try, participate, and come up with ideas.

In summary, these findings validate that positive reinforcement contributes to crafting a psychologically secure learning environment where mistakes are seen as something natural, as a valuable part, and as part of the learning process rather than as permanent and absolute failures. As students experience consistent encouragement and constructive feedback, their fear, anxiety, and *horror* of the imagination toward *vulgar* and *offensive* evaluation gradually diminish, encouraging them to participate more self-confidently and take greater risks in using English. This proposes that positive reinforcement reduces classroom anxiety, fosters resilience, and stimulates a growth-oriented mindset that is relevant to long-term language learning.

4.2.4 Encourage peer support in positive interactions.

The impact of positive reinforcement is not only a change in individual student behaviour, but it also affects how students interact with each other. Some students admit that when teachers treat them well and give them support, they also have a desire to help friends in their studies.

One student said, "I feel more motivated to help my classmates who are struggling so that they can understand the questions being asked" (R2). Another student supports this statement: "I can see how my teacher supports and encourages my classmates when they are struggling, and it really influences me. Before, I usually stayed quiet when my friend could not answer questions on the board or had to perform in front of the class. But now, I often see my classmates giving support by saying things like, 'Come on, you can do it!' or 'You are doing great!' We also help each other during group projects, and I really love English class like this" (R3). R1 also stated, "When my teacher appreciates (our) efforts, I realize, it is not only about getting good scores … having difficulties answering questions or completing tasks, (but) we can learn better when we support each other" (R1). It is in line with R4 who stated, "My teacher always told me that making mistakes is normal, but keep trying. I used to know someone pronounces a word incorrectly, I try not to laugh, I try to help instead of making them feel embarrassed. The classroom feels more friendly and comfortable" (R4). The last student provoked the same thing: "after seeing how my teacher encourages us and appreciates every effort, I started helping my friends (during discussions and activities). We (need to) support each other; learning English is more enjoyable" (R5).

These responses signify that positive reinforcement spreads beyond firming individual motivation; it also constructs a supportive classroom environment where encouragement, empathy, and collaborative learning become values among students. As a result, positive teacher-student interactions and relationships progressively change into positive equal interactions, fostering a more wide-ranging and cooperative EFL learning environment.

4.2.5 Strengthen the relationship between teachers and students.

Positive reinforcement has been proven to improve the relationship between students and their teachers. When teachers give motivational feedback consistently, students feel close to their teachers so that they are more comfortable communicating in the classroom such as

asking questions if they do not understand something or asking the teacher to re-explain slowly. One student shared, "I feel more comfortable and more confident with my teacher. Honestly, I am not a student who understands lessons quickly. In the past, I was always afraid to ask questions because teachers usually assumed that I was not paying attention properly. But now, I feel more comfortable asking questions because my teacher is kind and willing to explain the material to me repeatedly. My teacher told me that I am doing a great job because I keep trying and never give up. " (Respondent 4), while another said, "When my teacher gives feedback and encouragement regularly, I feel more confident and excited to learn" (Respondent 5).

The findings demonstrate that positive reinforcement is able to build mutual trust and respect, which is imperative for building class dynamics. All of these findings show that the application of positive reinforcement is able to meaningfully improve class dynamics. By crafting a supportive classroom environment, making students feel protected, appreciated, and motivated, and making students feel recognized in their every learning process. By acknowledging students' efforts and progress, teachers increase behavioural engagement through greater participation, foster cognitive engagement by encouraging perseverance and critical thinking, support emotional engagement by building comfort and confidence, promote positive communication among colleagues, and intensify teacher-student interactions through trust and mutual respect.

Positive reinforcement indicates that appreciation is not limited to students who are able to answer questions correctly or is given exclusively to students who are intelligent and get good grades. Positive reinforcement shows that every student who is in the learning process deserves support and appreciation from teachers and peers.

5. Discussion

The study aimed to examine how positive reinforcement improves classroom dynamics by affecting five important aspects of student engagement: behavioural, cognitive, emotional, communication and interaction, and the relationship between teacher and student. Based on several sources of the latest literature and theory, these findings confirm that positive reinforcement, when applied effectively, is not only able to increase student academic engagement but can also transform the classroom into a supportive, inclusive, and emotionally safe learning environment.

5.1 Behavioural Engagement: Encouraging Active Participation

Findings revealed that positive reinforcement significantly improved students' behavioural engagement. Students became more active in the classroom, more willing to answer questions, and more motivated to complete learning tasks when they received supportive encouragement by the teacher. This finding supports Operant Conditioning Theory, which argues that behaviours followed by positive consequences are more likely to be repeated (Skinner, 1965). The result is consistent with previous studies showing that praise, encouragement, and recognition can increase students' participation and classroom involvement (Uddin et al., 2017; Zhang & Cheng, 2024). When students receive positive responses from teachers, they tend to perceive classroom participation as a rewarding experience, which encourages them to engage more actively in subsequent learning activities.

However, the Theory of Self-Determination (SDT) presented by Deci & Ryan (1985) highlights that internal motivation is at the core of sustained engagement. External motivation causes a student or person to have a dependency on motivators rather than developing behaviours or learning motivations that come from themselves. In line with this theory, the research presented by Zhuang (2023) shows that self-motivation can make students consciously able to learn independently and consistently even when they are not told by the teacher or receive certain rewards. Based on research conducted by Ramachandran et al. (2019) shows that motivation that comes from within oneself not only increases students' learning outcomes but also affects the improvement of their behaviour. These studies and theories show that the development of students' external motivation is very important in their independent learning process. They can build perseverance in learning and do not depend on praise or other external things.

5.2 Cognitive Engagement: Strengthening Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving

The findings revealed that positive reinforcement significantly enhanced students' cognitive engagement. Students demonstrated greater persistence in solving problems, showed increased willingness to think critically, and became more actively involved in processing learning tasks. These findings suggest that positive reinforcement not only encourages participation but also supports a deeper learning process. Cognitive engagement involves the student's active investment in a learning process that requires critical thinking, problem-solving, and knowledge application (Ismayilova, 2025). This approach is in line with Skinner's Operant Conditioning Theory, which posits that behaviour is influenced by its consequences (Skinner, 1965). Positive reinforcement increases the likelihood of a repetitive behaviour. If the teacher continues to give positive feedback when students can solve problems or solve problems presented in class, students will be motivated to continue to strive to perform well. Similar findings have been reported by Fajrin et al. (2019), Sari & Rahmani (2024), Putri & Ningsih (2021), who found that positive reinforcement contributes to students' motivation, academic achievement, and engagement in classroom learning.

However, these findings should be interpreted with caution. Self-Determination Theory, presented by Deci & Ryan (1985) argues that excessive reliance on external rewards may reduce students' intrinsic motivation by shifting their focus from learning itself to obtaining rewards. Based on research conducted by Bear et al. (2017)the use of praise and recognition will greatly increase students' external motivation but decrease their intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is very important in the language learning process. In addition, successful language learners almost always have a high level of intrinsic motivation (Sara Jafari, 2013). They have a strong desire within them, diligence, persistence, consistency, the pleasure of completing tasks, and curiosity. These things encourage a language learner to continue to progress without being influenced by praise or other external things .

5.3 Emotional Engagement: Fostering a Sense of Belonging and Enthusiasm

The research has shown that positive reinforcement can make the students feel more comfortable in class and during the learning process because they know they will receive support and appreciation for their efforts and progress, rather than criticism or punishment when making mistakes. When students feel happy and have emotional security, their Affective Filter will be lower. This causes students to feel happy and confident so that they absorb the lessons more easily. In line with this theory, a study conducted by Ismayilli (2025)

shows that a comfortable and fun language class that is emotionally stress-free can increase students' motivation and confidence. In the context of learning English as a foreign language, where students may feel anxious or afraid of making mistakes, emotional engagement becomes important to pay attention to (Alfaeni et al., 2022). Teachers must take part in creating an environment that makes students feel emotionally comfortable, not just high grades and academic achievements.

However, contrasting perspectives caution against assuming that all emotional responses to reinforcement are universally positive. Emotion Regulation Theory suggests that some students may become overly dependent on external validation, which can reduce emotional resilience over time (Gross, 1998). It shows that when students rely too much on external validation to secure their validation, students will have difficulty managing their emotions independently. In addition, research conducted by Vaughn et al. (2023) shows that excessive or inappropriate praise can increase anxiety when the praise is stopped, demonstrating the importance of a balanced approach in providing feedback. Most teachers believe that giving praise for students' achievements or intelligence will make them more motivated in learning, but based on research conducted by Zarrinabadi et al. (2023) praise that focuses on achievements, such as calling students 'smart!' or 'great!' tends to make students feel like they have expectations and cause them to feel afraid or anxious if one day they are unable to achieve those expectations. In contrast, praise that supports effort, strategy, and perseverance will make students more resilient in their learning process. Wrong praise can hinder students' developmental process, but the right praise can motivate them and make them aware of their hard work to understand the lesson (Vaughn et al., 2023).

5.4 Communication and Interaction: Creating a Supportive Classroom Dialogue

The findings indicate that positive reinforcement contributed to improving communication and interaction in the classroom. Students became more willing to express their ideas, ask questions, collaborate with peers, and participate in classroom discussions. This finding is particularly important in EFL contexts, where students often experience anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and hesitation when communicating in English. This result aligns with sociocultural perspectives of learning, which emphasize that language development occurs through meaningful interaction (Miller, 2002). A supportive classroom environment created through praise, encouragement, and constructive feedback can reduce students' fear of negative evaluation and increase their willingness to communicate. Previous studies similarly found that positive reinforcement promotes student interaction, collaboration, and classroom participation by fostering a sense of comfort and psychological safety (Fitriati et al., 2020; Khajavy et al., 2018). However, not all scholars and studies agree that positive reinforcement is the primary factor driving effective communication in the classroom.

According to the Communication Accommodation Theory, successful communication is more dependent on the teacher's ability to adjust their communication style to suit students' characteristics and needs, rather than solely on praise or rewards (Soliz et al., 2022). In some contexts, positive reinforcement may even produce the opposite effect. A study by Do & Vu (2021) found that some university students felt uncomfortable with verbal praise from lecturers, perceiving it as a form of evaluation that added pressure and hindered verbal participation. Moreover, Wisniewski et al. (2020) demonstrated that informative feedback was more effective in enhancing student engagement than general positive reinforcement.

Furthermore, Rabbani & Husain (2024) emphasized the importance of students' mindsets in responding to classroom communication; students with a growth mindset were more capable of accepting criticism and were more motivated to interact, while positive reinforcement was insufficient to foster sustainable behavioural change. These findings suggest that good communication requires a more complex and adaptive approach, rather than just being responsive and relying on positive reinforcement.

5.5 Teacher-Student Relationship: Strengthening Trust and Connection

The findings indicate that positive reinforcement contributed to stronger teacher-student relationships. Students reported feeling more comfortable, respected, and supported by their teachers, which encouraged them to communicate more openly, ask questions, and seek assistance when facing difficulties. These findings suggest that positive reinforcement not only influences students' behaviour but also strengthens the interpersonal bond that supports effective learning. This result is consistent with Operant Conditioning Theory developed by Skinner (1965), which proposes that behaviours followed by positive consequences are more likely to be repeated. When teachers consistently provide encouragement, constructive feedback, and recognition of students' efforts, they create a supportive classroom climate that fosters trust and emotional connection. Previous studies have similarly found that positive teacher-student interactions enhance students' motivation, engagement, and sense of belonging (Carmona-Halty et al., 2019; Xie & Derakhshan, 2021).

Nevertheless, based on the Self Determination theory conveyed by Deci & Ryan (1985) explaining that external responses such as positive reinforcement can damage internal motivation if they are not aligned with students' competencies. This causes students to feel dependent on praise or positive responses in the process. When given a reward, they will be excited, but when they can answer questions or do something positive and do not get the positive feedback they expect or are usually given, then disappointment will arise and affect their performance in class. This not only affects academic performance and student participation but also decreases social interaction. Research has also shown that repetitive or insincere praise may lose its effectiveness and, in some cases, generate pressure among students (Markelz et al., 2022; Vaughn et al., 2023). Praise that is not done in a sincere and personal manner will make students feel that the words are just a general response, not something special.

Furthermore, the study conducted by Holroyd (2023) suggests that praise is not always received positively. In some cases, the compliment is rejected by the recipient because it causes discomfort and disagreement with the value implied by the compliment. Therefore, positive reinforcement should be delivered authentically and focus on students' effort, progress, and perseverance rather than merely offering general praise. When applied thoughtfully, it can strengthen trust, mutual respect, and positive relationships between teachers and students.

6. Conclusion

This study shows that positive reinforcement can increase student engagement significantly, which can influence class dynamics in five aspects: behavioural, cognitive, emotional, communicative, and relational. This encourages active participation, improves critical thinking skills, creates an emotionally comfortable classroom environment, and builds good

communication relationships between teachers and students. Positive reinforcement that is applied consistently and sincerely can create a more engaging, inclusive, and responsive classroom environment.

However, positive reinforcement cannot be done in general or mechanically like robotic responses that are made automatically but must use sincere efforts, pay attention to the process of development, and provide meaningful appreciation in the learning process. Positive reinforcement should support student autonomy and encourage internal student motivation by focusing on effort, strategy, and perseverance rather than just the results of academic grades or intelligence. Teachers should also consider the emotional needs, cultural background, and learning style of the individual. When applied with care, positive reinforcement is a strategy that can improve a more dynamic and supportive learning environment for anyone in the classroom, not only for the best, the smartest, the most genius, but anyone who is struggling and in the process of learning. Furthermore, this study also has several limitations. First, the study was conducted in only one junior high school with a limited number of participants, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader educational contexts. Second, the implementation of positive reinforcement was limited to a four-month intervention period, making it difficult to fully examine the long-term impact of this approach on students' engagement, motivation, and classroom behaviour.

Therefore, future research is recommended to involve wider and more diverse educational settings, longer intervention periods, and larger participant groups to investigate the long-term effects of positive reinforcement across different classroom contexts and student characteristics. Future studies may also explore how positive reinforcement can be integrated with strategies that support students' intrinsic motivation and emotional development more sustainably.

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