

Conducting Positive Reinforcement to Ensure Learner-Centered Pedagogy in the EFL Classroom: A Case Study at Junior High School in Surakarta

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Abstract

Positive reinforcement is an essential learning strategy and takes an important role in supporting the learning process effectiveness. Through the integration of positive reinforcement, it can create the expected behavioral change of students to be more positive and ensure learner-centered pedagogy. This study aims to explore the application of positive reinforcement and to investigate the impact of positive reinforcement on the implementation of learner-centered pedagogy in the English language classroom. This study utilizes a qualitative case study method collected through observations in the classroom and interviews. The participants of this study were an English teacher and six students who applied positive reinforcement. This study uses data analysis that was conducted through interactive model methods and validated using triangulation. The results of this study present that the application of positive reinforcement by the English teacher positively impacted on the students, especially on the implementation of learner-centered pedagogy. The use of positive reinforcement can support teachers in their role as facilitators to create a comfortable and pleasant classroom atmosphere, and can significantly increase student self-efficacy, student engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking skills.

Keywords: Positive reinforcement, learner-centered pedagogy, EFL, teaching skills, case study.

INTRODUCTION

Positive reinforcement is a significant part of teaching, which increases motivation among learners and optimizes the learning process. Teachers play a crucial role as educators and are a key factor in contributing to the achievement of learning objectives, as regulated in Indonesian Law Number 14 of 2005 concerning Teachers and

Lecturers, which asserts that teachers have the role as professional educators with the main responsibilities to educate, teach, guide, train, and evaluate students. Teachers need to understand and master teaching skill strategies to be applied in the classroom to cater to students' needs. Therefore, one of the strategies that can be done is to provide positive reinforcement to students. Positive reinforcement is a stimulus that was developed by a behaviorist, namely B.F. Skinner, which emphasizes the existence of behavior that is expected to occur again in the future (Skinner, 1963 in Wu & Chen, 2024). However, in the current educational context, the application of positive reinforcement by teachers has not achieved an optimal contribution in the learning process. The statement is supported by research conducted by Hasibuan and Moedjiono (2009) indicating that teachers have not fully paid attention to the positive reinforcement strategies that are important in the learning activities. Positive reinforcement is intended to enhance the active involvement of students in learning of student-centered to support achievement of targeted capabilities and learning objectives that have been formulated.

In this study, the approach emphasized is a learner-centered approach. Students are actively taking a role to engage in the learning process. Using positive reinforcement by teachers is intended to encourage students to be positive and reduce undesirable behaviors during learning. Thus, this research has an urgency to be carried out to obtain a broader understanding of positive reinforcement effectiveness strategies to students, especially in the context of learner-centered pedagogy. Several studies have previously explored the positive reinforcement application at different levels of education. Research conducted by Mantasiah et al. (2020) stated that teachers' low understanding regarding positive reinforcement plays the main factor in not maximizing the application of these strategies in the learning process. Eremie and Doueyi-Fiderikumo (2019) proposed that teachers conducted positive reinforcement can encourage the achievement of student learning outcomes. Another study conducted by Dyah and Angelina (2019) reported that praise as positive reinforcement can enhance student motivation. On the other hand, Bashir et al. (2020) revealed that there was an improvement in behavior that occurred after positive reinforcement was given. Senyamator (2020) revealed that positive reinforcement is a solution to behavioral problems that occur among students.

Based on an analysis of some previous studies relevant to the application of positive reinforcement, it was found that the exploration of the variety or types of positive reinforcement that are applied and its correlation and impact on learner-centered pedagogy, particularly in the English language classroom, is still limited. In relation to this, this study is addressed on answering the formulated questions:

1. How is positive reinforcement conducted in an EFL classroom in a junior high school in Surakarta?
2. What is the impact of positive reinforcement on the implementation of learner-centered pedagogy in an EFL classroom in a junior high school in Surakarta?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Positive Reinforcement

The Definition of Positive Reinforcement

In English language learning, one strategy that can be utilized by teachers is the application of positive reinforcement. According to Cooper (2010), positive reinforcement is an attempt at a stimulus followed by an action which affects the behavioral pattern. On the other hand, Downing et al. (1991) defined positive reinforcement as intended stimulus presented after the occurrence of a desired behavior that can provoke the same behavior in the future. Maag (2001) argued that positive reinforcement perceived as a principle that can unconsciously create the desirable behavior. The intended stimulus can be something pleasant and fine that consists of a strong positive response (Alberto & Troutman, 1990). Hence, it can be concluded that positive reinforcement is an action or stimulus that can provide a positive response and foster the expected behavior.

Positive reinforcement is one type of reinforcement according to theory of B.F. Skinner's (1938) including positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement. From both types of reinforcement, each has a similarity in purpose which is to promote behavior. However, this study only focuses the positive reinforcement application.

The Components of Positive Reinforcement

Eremie and Doueyi-Fiderikumo (2019) classified positive reinforcement into two forms, consisting of verbal and non-verbal reinforcement. Verbal reinforcement includes two terms, including praises and indications of agreement (Oakes et al., 1960). Praises are a component of positive reinforcement that is used to express the expected response. The utterances of praise can take the form of anything more positive and stronger, such as the words "Good!", "Well done!", "Keep going!", etc. (Forness, 1973; & Eder, 1983). In addition to giving praises as a form of verbal reinforcement, the application of indications of agreement can also be applied. Agreement is a statement that shows consent as a stimulus in reinforcement. For instance, the statement "Yes, right!", "Yes, that's it!", or the like (Verplanck, 1955). These two types of verbal reinforcement can lead to purposeful learning so that students can be more focused and excited.

Another type of positive reinforcement is non-verbal reinforcement. Usman (2005) classifies this reinforcement into 5 types, that is, gestural, proximity, contact, activity, and token or symbolic reinforcement. Barnett (1983) elaborated gestural reinforcement as the movement of hands, arms, head, and eye expressions. Proximity reinforcement is a classroom management carried out by teachers to control student behavior in class and to avoid unpleasant behavior, by getting close to students during learning (Etscheidt et al., 1984). According to Andrzejewski and Davis (2008), contact reinforcement is intended to provide a tangible experience directly in the present or future moment. Eye contact is one of the best examples of contact reinforcement (Korthagen et al., 2014).

Activity reinforcement is explained by Reynolds et al. (1989) as an activity that is expected when there is free time where students can do the activities they want such as playing games, watching movies on the projector, and others. Moreover, according to Birnbraurer et al. (1965), token or symbolic reinforcement is an object or symbol that can be exchanged by something as a form of reinforcement after the occurrence of behavior that is intended for specific behavior.

Learner-Centered Pedagogy

The Definition of Learner-Centered Pedagogy

Weimer (2002) defines learner-centered pedagogy as a pedagogy that create a learning environment more engaging, creative, and thoughtful in critical thinking. Learner-centered pedagogy refers to an active learning, inquiry, and innovative education (Bremner et al., 2022). This pedagogy focuses on putting students as the main subject of the learning process according to each of their individual needs, such as interests and capabilities, and various backgrounds that can improve teaching approaches (Bartlett et al., 2013). From these explanations, it can be concluded that learner-centered pedagogy is pedagogy that encourages learners to be engaged in learning and build critical thinking through interaction and personal experience as it can improve teaching strategies.

The Components of Learner-Centered Pedagogy

Learner-centered pedagogy essentially is about students actively participating in learning. As facilitators, teachers have the responsibility to provide an inclusive learning environment that not only accommodates the different characteristics and needs of students but also contributes to the students' critical thinking skills development and understanding of the learning material through classroom interaction and personal experience through self-evaluation (Moate et al., 2015). Fernandez (2017) stated that the main components in this pedagogy are student engagement, motivation, empowerment, collaboration, and reflection. The level of student engagement can be viewed from behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Conner, 2016). During learning, conducting a discussion as a collaboration between students is considered to be important to create a learner-centered pedagogy by considering the other students' opinions, taking full responsibility for the success of a group in discussion, and having good behavior while working together with peers (Wang et al., 2009). These components will be formed, not only through students, but also from the important role of the teacher being a facilitator, which requires a specific ability to achieve that role. On the other hand, Troop et al. (2015) describe that learner-centered pedagogy can be improved through students' self-efficacy that can be formed during the learning process. Self-efficacy can be enhanced through learning outcomes, simulation-based activities, persuasive and biological attitudes or responses (Bandura, 1978). Therefore, to achieve effective learning goals and targets, students must be encouraged and provided with opportunities to engage and participate significantly.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

Qualitative approach through the case study method are used in this study with the aim to explore the positive reinforcement used by the English teacher and its effect that focuses on the learner-centered pedagogy. Creswell (2014, p. 241) stated that a case study that case studies are part of the qualitative approach, where researchers intensively examine a process, activity, or event involving one or several individuals as research subjects. This study involved an English teacher and six students in an English class who applied positive reinforcement.

Data Collection

This study collected the data through classroom observation and interview with participants. Observation was conducted in the classroom to conduct monitoring of teacher and student activities and behaviors using field notes. Meanwhile, interview was conducted after classroom observation using the face-to-face method, covering the perception and knowledge of the English teacher regarding the positive reinforcement applied in class and students' perceptions after having received positive reinforcement from the teacher and its impact on them.

Trustworthiness

The data validity used in this study is triangulation to check trustworthiness. Triangulation includes multiple sources and stages from various fields to build a stable pattern (Stahl & King, 2020). In this study, the trustworthiness method uses the form of member checking. Doyle (2007) explained member checking is a method to prove validity in qualitative research.

Data Analysis

The interactive analysis model method was used to analyze the data. This model, argued by Miles et al. (2014), involving the three main parts, namely data condensation, data display, conclusion drawing and verification. After overall data that is needed was chosen for the study, the thematic analysis adapted in this study was carried out through matrix formulation along with the final step was to summarize the overall data that had been analyzed with a display table.

FINDINGS

In this part, the findings are presented to address the previously formulated questions, specifically regarding the positive reinforcement applied by the English teacher and its impact on the student-centered pedagogy.

Positive Reinforcement Conducted in an EFL Classroom

In the context of English learning, the teacher applied positive reinforcement strategies that include two types, that is, verbal reinforcement and non-verbal reinforcement. The English teacher used the two types of reinforcement at the same time to facilitate the way students learn.

Verbal Reinforcement

The verbal reinforcement that is applied was giving praises and indications of agreement.

"Consciously or unconsciously, I definitely provide positive verbal reinforcement to the students. At least praise like "Good!" or sometimes "Very good!", "Excellent!" it depends on the context."

"If a student answers a question correctly in the class, I say "Oh yes that's right!" or "Yes, that's it!"."

(Int-13/3/25-SY/T)

Based on the result from the interview with the English teacher, he applied both types of verbal reinforcement according to the students' behavior during the lesson. In accordance with the results of observations made by the researcher, the teacher gave praises using the words "Good!", "Very good!", "Excellent!" 29 times. Furthermore, the teacher gave indications of agreement in the form of "Yes!", "Yes, right!", "Yes, that's it!" 12 times.

Non-Verbal Reinforcement

Nonverbal reinforcement is another type of reinforcement that the English teacher applies besides the verbal reinforcement. This type of reinforcement consists of gestural, proximity, contact, activity, and token or symbolic reinforcement. Derived from the observations and interviews conducted by the researcher and the English teacher, not all of the types of non-verbal reinforcement are applied and occur in the classroom.

"For non-verbal reinforcement, I do not frequently give it honestly, not as much as verbal ones. Yes, like thumbs up, clapping, nodding head. Not as much as the verbal ones, Miss..."

"During learning, I often approach the students, Miss. For example, if they are doing the assignment, I check their answers and say "Oh, that's good!""

(Int-13/3/25-SY/T)

The English teacher stated that the non-verbal reinforcement carried out by him was still rare and not as frequently as the use of verbal reinforcement. One of them is by giving gestures such as thumbs up, clapping, and nodding head as a form of encouragement to students, as well as making an approach with students not to stand in

one place but to walk closer to the students' seats. In addition, the other non-verbal reinforcement such as making contact is often done by the teacher by making eye contact when interacting, explaining learning materials, and even asking questions to students. Activity reinforcement is also rarely done by the English teacher and was only applied once according to the observations and the interview that has been conducted.

"Physical contact is rare. If the lesson is rather slow or when we have finished a material, I have given rather fun activities such as games but it is not often. That is to make the students not bored but it must be outside the material as well...."

"Incidentally, never in the context of learning. Once, for example, when having a relaxing time, sometimes I bring candy or something and I ask them to share it, but the context is not during the lesson."

(Int-13/3/25-SY/T)

Moreover, the token or symbolic reinforcement seems to have been never applied in the classroom. This type of reinforcement involves giving items or gifts as a form of encouragement or appreciation for students' efforts. The English teacher believes that when students are given items or gifts, it is certain that they will be delighted and more motivated to learn.

The Impact of Positive Reinforcement on the Implementation of Learner-Centered Pedagogy

Positive reinforcement that was applied by the English teacher positively impacted on the students in implementing learner-centered pedagogy. A total of six students were interviewed to give their views on the application of positive reinforcement that the English teacher provided to them. The essential components of learner-centered pedagogy such as self-efficacy, engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking increased significantly.

Through positive reinforcement, some students claimed that they became more confident because they were rewarded and appreciated from their efforts. However, one of the students expressed a rather neutral response after receiving positive reinforcement because she had already experienced positive reinforcement by teachers in other subjects. Furthermore, most of them admitted that the English teacher has belief in their ability during learning, which means that the method applied by the English teacher can improve students' persuasive behavior. Therefore, positive reinforcement from the English teacher provides space for students to be brave and not ashamed to ask questions, participate, and engage in learning activities. The confidence in students' abilities possessed by the teacher shows that students will be motivated to continue to be actively growing. Hence, it can be said that positive reinforcement strongly effect in changing the behavior of the student.

Another impact is related to students' engagement during learning. Some students stated that the positive response from the English teacher made them motivated to participate more in class.

"His response is positive and gives appreciation because I have answered correctly, so I want to participate more in class." (Int-13/3/25-S4)

"Yes, his response was like saying, 'That's right, good, or thumbs up.' I want to participate more in class." (Int-13/3/25-S6)

The positive response given by the teacher increased the students' engagement level by being more active in participation, either asking or responding to questions that are asked. Through the English teacher's positive response, students feel more cared for and appreciated by the teacher so that there is motivation to want to participate more in class activities. At that time, their level of engagement would be increased significantly.

During the learning process, students were found having a discussion with peers to respond to questions from the teacher. As a facilitator, the English teacher provides support to students when they face any difficulties on the learning material. Some students claimed that when they were discussing, the teacher provided reinforcement. On the other hand, student 3 argued that the teacher never gave reinforcement, *"So far, never miss, because we have an initiative discussion so the English teacher doesn't approach us like that but it's more like we will answer it ourselves..."* Student 3 believed that the teacher did not provide reinforcement because the discussions they had were based on their desires, not instructions from the teacher. This shows that although teachers do not always give positive reinforcement to collaborative activities such as discussions conducted by the students, they still show their enthusiasm in doing these activities. In other words, the existence of positive reinforcement still forms a sense of enthusiasm and enthusiasm for collaboration during learning.

Positive reinforcement used by the teacher has a significant role as a tool to improve students' understanding and critical thinking towards the learning material. Thus, students can become more curious about what they have learned and what they will learn further. Based on the observations conducted, students expressed their interest in learning more deeply when the teacher started to relate it to their real lives. Most of the students claimed that the English teacher encouraged them to ask questions during the learning process. Some types of positive reinforcement applied by the teacher have an impact on several aspects of the cognitive and social development of the students which are considered as components of learner-centered pedagogy.

DISCUSSION

The results revealed that the positive reinforcement applied by the English teacher was verbal and non-verbal reinforcement, which contributed to building a conducive learning atmosphere and optimizing the students' cognitive and social aspects. It showed that the application of positive reinforcement can bring a positive learning experience and interaction between teachers and students when the learning process

takes place. Thus, meaningful learning will be created indirectly. This result supports previous findings (Haataja et al., 2020; Aniley, 2025) which argued that teachers' positive reinforcement can provide the expected learning environment and improve students' overall academic outcomes.

Moreover, through positive reinforcement provided by teachers, it has a huge impact on the active participations level of the students while the learning process takes place and their desire to think more critically about the material presented, in line with what was found in previous studies (Wang et al., 2021; Abdulrazak et al., 2025) which indicated that reinforcement from teachers can motivate students to maintain their active contribution and tendency to develop critical thinking skills. As a result, positive reinforcement strategies applied by teachers have a great contribution as a space or tool as a source to improve the cognitive processes that exist in students, namely an increase in self-efficacy, involvement, collaboration, and critical thinking skills.

CONCLUSION & SUGGESTION

According to the results of the findings, it indicates that in the learning practices, the English teacher applied the two types of positive reinforcement. Verbal reinforcement applied more frequently compared to non-verbal reinforcement. However, it was discovered that the English teacher's use of positive reinforcement still looks monotonous and less varied, especially in the variety of expressions and techniques used. Positive reinforcement given positively impacted on the implementation of learner-centered pedagogy or on students' cognitive and social aspects, including self-efficacy, engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking, which all of these have an important role for the sustainability of learning success.

Furthermore, teachers are expected to master and understand in delivering positive reinforcement effectively and inclusively in the classroom to the students by practicing and getting used to applying it everyday. On the other hand, this study still has deficiencies in the participants involved and only focuses on one level of education. Suggestions for future researchers are to involve more participants from many different levels of education so that the research results obtained are more comprehensive and varied.

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