

Exploring the strategies for positive reinforcement and negative Reinforcement in ESL Classrooms: A Case Study of English Language Teachers in Public School Mirpurkhas, Pakistan

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Abstract

Study has been conducted to explore the strategies of reinforcement which are used by the English language teachers in public school Mirpurkhas. Broadly, there are two types of reinforcement in behaviorism theory, and distinct teachers use multiple strategies for positive and negative reinforcement. This is a qualitative case study. Specifically, it is an exploratory case study, as it reveals the strategies for reinforcement in a specific context. Purposive sampling was used for the selection of participants; as only English language teachers were chosen, who had experience of at least two years, teaching. Furthermore, data were collected through two tools. One is a semi-structured interview protocol and second is an observation sheet for the triangulation of the data. Then the data were analyzed by using thematic analysis model of Braun and Clark 2006. Results of the study show that teachers use positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement in different ways. Conclusively, findings demonstrate diverse strategies for positive and negative reinforcement. Broadly those are verbal, non-verbal physical gifts and punishment.

Key Words: Reinforcement, Positive Reinforcement, Negative Reinforcement

I Introduction:

This study is qualitative in nature, specifically an exploratory case study. It follows a constructivism paradigm. The case of study is public school Mirpurkhas, as the purpose of study is to explore distinct strategies of reinforcement which are used by English language teachers of the public school Mirpurkhas. Five teachers were selected through purposive sampling. Furthermore, two tools were used for data collection. Those are semi-structured interview protocol and observation sheets. Then the data were analyzed through thematic analysis. Five themes emerged from the data of participants, then those themes were merged into three main themes which were closely related to each other.

2. Literature Review:

Pakistan is an ESL country where English is taught as second language, therefore English is learnt instead of acquisition. So reinforcement is a technique which is used in ESL classrooms by teachers in order to teach them English language effectively. Where learning takes place by controlling and changing their behaviors. This literature review will provide two important dimensions of the topic. Firstly, it will draw a theoretical framework on the topic. Secondly, it will reveal the existing research on the topic.

2.1 Theoretical Framework:

Behaviorism is revolved around three tenants, those are conditioning, reward and punishment. (McLeod, 2015) It emerged in 1920s by BF Skinner where the Watson and other psychologist had left. As cherry (2025) mentioned in her blog it was officially published in 1913 in the paper of "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views" by john, B. Watson. He believed that observable behaviors should be studied rather than mind or thoughts. Two theories are common in behaviorism, those are classical conditioning and operant

conditioning. Classical conditioning is all about association between meaningful and neutral stimuli (guy-Evan, 2024) it is about the association between two stimuli to produce a learned response or behavior. (Rehmani & Sari, 2024). An operant is any intentional action that affects the surroundings and leads to certain outcomes specifically operant conditioning. (McLeod, 2025) Behaviors are increased and decreased by their consequences as if an actions is followed by a reward, its probability of occurrence will be increase, however when an action brings a punishment, its probability will be decreased.

2.1.1 Two important elements in operant conditioning

A) Reinforcement:

A repeated action in order to increase the probability of a behavior or act as (Wadesango, 2022) it is a way which makes an action happen frequently by adding or removing something. (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007, as cited in Rahmani & Sari, 2024). Reinforcement is defined as adding or removing something after behavior to increase its recurrence. Broadly there are two types of reinforcement. First is positive in which desirable reward or appreciation is given to students in order to increase the probability of good behavior and second is negative reinforcement where an unpleasant situation is removed for increasing the frequency of an action.

B) Punishment:

It uses to decrease the probability of behaviors through scolding or punishment as university of central Florida (n.d) it always decreases the behavior whether it is negative punishment (remove pleasant scenario or stimulus) or positive punishment (add unpleasant stimulus or scenario).

2.2 Existing research about the types of reinforcement:

There are multiple types of reinforcement. Everyone has their own types of reinforcement as Sial et al. (2024) mentioned four types of reinforcement in their research, which are positive reinforcement, Negative reinforcement,

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Extinction and Punishment. Similarly this study will explore types of reinforcements, which are used by the teachers of public school Mirpurkhas. There is a lot study has been done in diverse contexts as this literature review present it. As one of the research has been done in Jordanian preschool (Ahmed et al., 2023) findings are that four main categories were used there for English language teaching, those are verbal, tangible, social and activity reinforcement. The data was collected from one hundred seventy eight teachers, from different schools. Furthermore distant types of reinforcement have been explored in the study, which was held at Bali kiddy school in Indonesia (Arista et al., 2018) five main types of reinforcement have been explored from the data and each type then categorized in positive and negative reinforcement. Main types are verbal reinforcement, Gestural reinforcement, contact reinforcement, contact reinforcement, Activity reinforcement and Token reinforcement. Similar to in okara, Punjab, Pakistan research has been done (Parveen et al., 2023) where teachers use both type of reinforcement verbal and non-verbal by using proximity, that refers sitting or standing with students. Nurdiana et al. (2021) this study is conducted at SMKS yaspib Bontolempangan, explored five types of reinforcements including verbal, gestural, proximity, contact and through symbols like stars.

3. Research Gap:

There is a much study has been done on Reinforcement and strategies of reinforcement, but there is not a study found on the participants of public school Mirpurkhas. Different Types of reinforcement are explored but in different context, so this study will reveal the types of reinforcement or strategies which are used by the English language teachers of public school Mirpurkhas.

4. Research Question:

Q.I What are the strategies used by ESL teachers for positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement?

5. Objective of Research:

To explore the types of reinforcement used by teachers of public school Mirpurkhas.

6. Significance of study:

This study will be fruitful for the scholars who are more interested to know about different ways of reinforcement. Similarly, English language teachers can also get benefits from the study as they can learn new techniques or strategies of reinforcement that can help them to plan their lessons, manage classroom and control the good and bad behavior of students. Lastly it will add the new insight in existing research.

7. Methodology:

This research follows constructivist paradigm as types of reinforcement are explored from specific participants. It is a qualitative research in nature because the findings are based on the themes or words. Furthermore, it is an exploratory case study because it explores the types of reinforcements in a specific case and the case of study is Public School Mirpurkhas. Five Participants are selected by purposive samplings, like the teachers who teach English in primary, secondary and higher level were interviewed for the study because they had experience of teaching English language. Two tools were used for data collection, one was Semi-Structured interview protocol, which is adapted from Nurdiana et al. (2021) and second was observation sheet, which was adapted from (Parveen et al., 2023) study. Five classes has been observed of five teachers one class was about forty minutes that means two hundred minutes they were observed, and they were interviewed in Urdu and English language according to their ease. Then data were transcribe through different software like Transcriber, Transkriptor, after that data transcribed

data was translated through google translator. Finally data was analyzed through thematic analysis.

8. Data Analysis:

Data has analyzed through the Braun and Clark model of thematic analysis. Interviews were transcribed through different software, then the data was read and reread for familiarizing of data. Initial codes were generated after that themes were created and related codes were put under the same themes. Then themes were explained by quoting the data from interviews. At the end in final stage the themes were discussed in discussion part.

9. Findings:

9.1 Positive Reinforcement:

This theme indicates positive reinforcement. Which refers to the repetition of an action in order to increase the desirable behavior. In other words, for increasing the participation of students in classroom, teachers use verbal reinforcement, non-verbal reinforcement and physical rewards. As it can be seen by their responses as well as classroom observation.

9.1.1 Verbal reinforcement:

Teachers use praising, encouraging and appreciating words for students like these, are the examples which are taken directly from the data “*Great job*”, “*Nice attempt*”, “*You’re improving*”, “*Excellent work*”, “*Great effort*”, “*Amazing potential*”, “*I’m proud of your progress*”, “*Effort is commendable*”, “*Well done*”, “*impressive work*”, “*proud of you*”, “*Wow, you’re absolutely right*”, “*Very good*”, “*Your effort is commendable*”, “*Question is very good*” for the confirmation of the interviews they were observed. Hence, proved that they use these words and comments for encouraging students to increase the probability of their acts.

9.1.2 Non-verbal reinforcement:

body language plays a vital role in daily life, and it can be effective to teach comprehensively. It motivates learners and build rapport between teachers

and students. Like this excerpt shows: "I use these gestures to encourage and motivate them." Similarly, these gestures motivate students and make them feel valued, as is shown from the response of the participant: *"I use these positive gestures like thumbs up, clapping, smiling, and nodding to show appreciation for good answers"*. These are the non-verbal cues which are used by the teachers of public school Mirpurkhas for motivating students.

9.9.3 Tangible reward reinforcement:

Teachers use different ways to motivate students, but motivating students through awards is the most effective way for positive reinforcement. Teachers mostly reward students for appreciating them and make them feel special by giving different types of gifts. As, it is represented through the excerpt of participants "rewards such as chocolates, books, customized pens, stars, stickers, acknowledgement, extra marks, extra participation opportunities, or displaying their work". Using rewards for appreciation, whether in the form of physical gifts, certificates, or extra marks can make students more excited, motivated and consistent in learning.

9.2 Negative Reinforcement:

This theme demonstrates negative reinforcement, which is used for decreasing behaviors. To make students' learning effective, teachers use to scolding and punishing them. As these quotations reveal the way teacher warn students to not repeat that mistake again.

9.2.1 Verbal reinforcement:

It refers to use negative words or use an aggressive accent by shouting in the class to make students disciplined and focused. These are some of the excerpts which are taken from interviews; *"I don't scold the students, but yeah, when it is needed, I do it. "I go to the students, whoever is making the noise, and then I say to them that I don't want to hear this sort of noise from you from the next time", "Say to him not to do it from the next time"*.

9.2.2 punishment:

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This theme elaborates the role of punishment in negative reinforcement. additionally, it shows role of punishment in learning. In other words, punishment can regulate, change and improve learning. Hence, it is also important for making students disciplined, good learners or keeping focused on study. As one of the response from the teachers revealed, *“I just gave only one piece of permission, and that is, make them stand in the class for just like three minutes or four minutes it creates a kind of, you know, shyness or assurance to the students. So, that usually they don't do it for the next time”*. Moreover, sometimes teachers get students out from the class, if they annoy them and disturb other classmates as responses of *participants demonstrate “I rarely get my irritating student out of class”*.

10. Discussion:

English teachers of the public school Mirpurkhas apply both types of reinforcement in their classes. They use positive reinforcement by using three ways. Firstly, they use verbal reinforcement. In which the reinforcement is provided through different words and comments. It encourages students through positive compliments, praising words and motivating words, as (Ahmed et al., 2023), teachers use appreciative words and phrases to motivate students like stunning, good, excellent etc. Secondly, they use gestures, including postures and facial expressions for reinforcement. Teachers mostly smile, nod, and clap for students. As a result, they get motivation and participate in the classroom. As research shows the same type (Parveen et al., 2023), teachers use different gestures for meaningful teaching, like giving thumbs up, smiling or clapping. Thirdly, rewards are also used by teachers. For instance, chocolates, certificates, extra-marks and stars. One of the studies referred to gifts with praising and appreciating words and positive gestures. Satoto and Subekti (2023) demonstrated this type of reinforcement in their research as they use rewards that are not physical gifts. However, they used

verbal praise by using praising words, non-verbal praise by clapping for students and social rewards by giving them responsibility of class or group.

Unlike, negative reinforcement, which is totally opposite to the positive reinforcement. Negative reinforcement discourages them to performing an undesirable behavior like not completing the tasks or home works. Teachers use two strategies in the classroom for negative reinforcement. First is through words like, scolding aggressively and second is punishment, where teacher stand up student and get them out of class.

II. Conclusion:

The study explored diverse strategies, which are used by the English language teachers in public school Mirpurkhas. According to the collected data, four strategies are used. First is reinforce students through verbal reinforcement, which uses words and comments for reinforcement. It can be positive by using praising words and negative, by using warning sentences for the next time. Second is non-verbal reinforcement, which uses gestures, postures and facial expressions for reinforcement by smiling, clapping and nodding, and third is reinforcement through rewards, which provides gifts to students that can be certificates or something for eating. Last is reinforcement through punishment, which prefers to punish students for not completing the task or inappropriate behavior by standing them out from the class or assigning them double homework.

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