

## The Role of Positive Reinforcement on Students in English Language Learning: A Skinnerian behaviorist

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### ABSTRACT

Operant conditioning, also known as instrumental conditioning, involves the use of rewards and punishments to establish a relationship between behavior and its consequences, both positive and negative. Positive reinforcement involves introducing desired stimuli, while negative reinforcement involves removing unwanted stimuli. Both positive and negative reinforcement aim to strengthen the exhibited behavior. This research aims to explore the role of positive reinforcement in motivating students in English language learning. The data for this study were obtained through interviews with English teachers in schools in Surakarta who have been teaching English for a minimum of 3 years. The data were then analyzed using qualitative descriptive methods. The results of the interviews indicate that the use of positive reinforcement in the classroom is highly beneficial for motivating students to learn English. A safe and comfortable classroom environment is also essential to support learning activities.

### 1. Introduction

Burrhus Frederic Skinner, better known as B.F. Skinner, was born on March 20, 1904, in Susquehanna, Pennsylvania, to the couple William and Grace Skinner. He passed away on August 18, 1990, in Massachusetts. Skinner was a psychologist, author, inventor, and social philosopher. From 1958 to 1974, he served as a professor of psychology at Harvard University. One of Skinner's famous theories is operant conditioning, where he defined 'operant' as any active behavior that influences the environment and produces consequences. This theory explains the acquisition of learned behaviors in our daily lives. Operant conditioning, also known as instrumental conditioning, involves the use of rewards and punishments for behavior, forming associations between behavior and its consequences, whether positive or negative. Its application extends beyond experimental settings to everyday learning, occurring naturally in various environments.

Operant conditioning consists of four types: positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, positive punishment, and negative punishment. Skinner's learning theory has proven effective in motivating or changing the behavior of young learners through reinforcement and punishment strategies. For example, setting a time for a student who often leaves their seat and providing a reward each time they remain seated is a positive reinforcement approach. Another method involves establishing a positive incentive system in the classroom, where positive behavior is rewarded before addressing negative behavior. Direct implementation of positive reinforcement is recommended to associate it effectively with the rewarded behavior (Echezona and Ojukwu, 2023). This research focuses on the role of positive reinforcement in English language learning activities.

Reinforcement, as defined by Cooper, Heron, and Heward (2007), involves adding or subtracting something after a behavior occurs to increase the likelihood of that behaviors recurring. Reinforcement can take various forms, including stimuli, events, and situations. In the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class, reinforcement can manifest as praise, early class dismissal, token rewards, candies, extra playtime, and engaging activities. Positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement share the same goal of encouraging specific behavior but use different methods. Positive reinforcement introduces desired stimuli, while negative reinforcement removes undesired stimuli, both aiming to strengthen the exhibited behavior (Ackerman, 2016). For instance, a teacher can give rewards such as candies or pencils to students who achieve good grades (positive reinforcement) or eliminate additional assignments for students who perform well (negative reinforcement).

It is important to distinguish between reinforcement and punishment because reinforcement increases behavior, while punishment decreases it (Skinner, 1953). Sometimes, teachers tend to use punishment for unwanted behavior, neglecting emphasis on maintaining and praising positive behavior to prevent undesirable behavior. To manage student behavior effectively, teachers should implement a behavior management system focused on preventing unwanted behavior by providing positive reinforcement and praise for desired behavior. Cultivating a positive learning environment and positive habits from an early stage not only ensures a safer class but also forms strong and enduring learning habits in students (Ningsih, 2021).

Using reinforcement is an effective strategy to shape positive behavior in students and motivate them to learn (Wahyudi, 2013). According to Vicko (2001), reinforcement serves as a way to enhance student motivation in the classroom, foster creativity, and ultimately yield more effective learning outcomes. Additionally, Sanjaya (2006) asserts that positive reinforcement positively influences students' attitudes, indicating that when an event or stimulus is presented as a consequence of an attitude, that attitude tends to strengthen.

Cooper, Heron, and Heward (2007) provide a comprehensive explanation of reinforcement, defining it as the addition or removal of something after a behavior occurs, with the aim of increasing the likelihood of that behavior recurring in the future. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes, reinforcement can take the

form of praise, early dismissal from class, token rewards, candies, extra playtime, and engaging activities.

Skinner (1938) initially categorized reinforcement into two types: positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement, with negative reinforcement considered equivalent to punishment. However, in 1953, Skinner revised his opinion, emphasizing that negative reinforcement differs from punishment. In the revised version, he explained that positive reinforcement strengthens behavior by introducing a favorable event, while negative reinforcement strengthens behavior by removing or avoiding an unpleasant event. Although positive and negative reinforcement share the general goal of encouraging specific behavior, they use different methods. Positive reinforcement involves adding desired stimuli to a situation, while negative reinforcement involves removing undesired stimuli, both aiming to strengthen the exhibited behaviors (Ackerman, 2016 Ningsih, 2021).

## 2. Methods

This study is a qualitative research. The data obtained in this research was collected through the semi-structured interview method. The participants involved in this study were English teachers in schools in the city of Surakarta who met the criteria of having taught English for a minimum of 3 years. The collected data were analyzed using a qualitative descriptive method, presenting results in a descriptive manner without including numerical data. The purpose of this research is to obtain in-depth answers by examining the role of positive reinforcement in English language learning. In addition to using the interview method to gather primary data for this research, the researcher also employed the library research method.

## 3. Result and Discussion

Through the interviews conducted between the researcher and the informant, namely Informant A, several findings were identified:

### 3.1 Issues Arising in English Language Teaching and Learning Activities

Informant A highlighted some issues that arise in English language teaching and learning activities:

- 1) Motivation is one of the significant challenges in English language learning. Low student motivation makes it difficult for them to understand the material. The underlying reason for low motivation is the mindset or perception that English is very difficult to comprehend.

*"Students often perceive English as a challenging and less important language. Especially grammar, for students, it's like a daunting problem that is not easy to memorize."*

- 2) Student fear when asked to showcase their skills in activities like speaking. This aligns with low student motivation to learn and try, resulting in inadequate development of their understanding and skills.

*"Students find it difficult to present using English. They are often afraid. Even though it's okay to make mistakes, everyone is learning."*

### 3.2 The Role of Positive Reinforcement for Students According to the Teacher

To address the identified issues, Informant A, as a teacher, employs various methods or innovations that, in their view, have a positive impact on the encountered problems:

#### 1) Creating a Comfortable Classroom Environment for Students

Informant A believes that creating a comfortable and safe classroom environment is crucial. A classroom where students are not afraid to speak English, even if their proficiency is not perfect. A comfortable environment encourages students to be active and confident, knowing that there will be no issues if they make mistakes or express difficulties in understanding the material.

*"Students must feel comfortable with me first. English is not easy, but it doesn't mean it's impossible to learn. It's okay to make mistakes; I usually help with corrections."*

#### 2) Providing Positive Reinforcement to Students

Giving positive reinforcement to students aligns with the goals of the independent curriculum. This also supports the idea mentioned above that a comfortable classroom setting enhances the beauty and smoothness of the learning process. Supporting the comfort within the class involves providing positive reinforcement in the form of words, such as praising their achievements or reassuring them if they still do not fully grasp the taught material.

*"In my class, I often give words of affirmation to the students, so they feel comfortable and trust me that I will understand any mistakes they make in their learning. They also become more confident even when they find it challenging to understand the material."*

From the above findings, it can be concluded that positive reinforcement in B.F. Skinner's Operant Conditioning Theory has a positive impact on building students' confidence and comfort in English language learning. A comfortable atmosphere and good self-confidence will enhance their learning motivation. Consequently, the conveyed material can be absorbed effectively.

## 4. Conclusion

The conclusion of this study is that positive reinforcement, in line with the Operant Conditioning Theory proposed by B.F. Skinner, has a positive impact on enhancing students' confidence and comfort in learning English. In the classroom context, creating a comfortable and safe environment for students, where they are not afraid to speak in English, is a crucial key. This supportive environment encourages students to actively participate and believe that mistakes are part of the learning process. Teachers, as learning facilitators, play a crucial role in creating a conducive environment. Providing positive reinforcement, both in the form of words of praise and reassurance, helps build students' self-confidence. Additionally, positive reinforcement also serves as part of the independent curriculum approach, where students feel supported to try and learn without fear of excessive criticism.

In addition to addressing motivation issues and students' reluctance to speak English, positive reinforcement also has a positive impact on students' social skills and well-being. Teachers who consistently apply positive reinforcement create a positive learning climate where students feel valued and accepted. Therefore, the implementation of positive reinforcement in English language learning can be an effective strategy to improve learning outcomes and create a positive learning environment. This conclusion emphasizes the importance of the teacher's role in understanding and applying the principles of learning psychology, especially in the context of operant conditioning theory, to achieve optimal learning goals. it

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