

The Teacher's Perception of Reinforcement and Its Impact on Student Engagement in English Language Learning: A Qualitative Study

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DOI: <https://10.33096/tamaddun.v24i1.956>

Received: 5 June 2025

Accepted: 30 June 2025

Published: 29 July 2025

Abstract

This study explores the perception of an English teacher regarding the use of reinforcement and its impact on student engagement in English language learning. Conducted at SMPN 40 Makassar, the research utilized a qualitative descriptive approach to investigate how the teacher views reinforcement as a tool to support behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. The primary data were gathered through an in-depth interview with one male eighth-grade English teacher and supplemented by six classroom observations conducted over a three-week period. The findings revealed that the teacher perceives reinforcement not merely as a classroom management technique but as a powerful pedagogical strategy to stimulate motivation, reduce learning anxiety, and foster students' sense of belonging and competence in the English classroom. Verbal reinforcement, such as praise and addressing students by name, and non-verbal reinforcement, such as smiling, gestures, and eye contact, were consistently applied throughout the observed lessons. The teacher also emphasized the importance of applying reinforcement equitably and intentionally, tailoring it to the diverse personalities and needs of students. These insights align with the theoretical frameworks of Skinner, Bandura, Deci & Ryan, and Fredricks et al. Reinforcement, as perceived and practiced by the teacher, plays a significant role in enhancing student engagement and creating an inclusive, supportive learning environment.

Keywords: reinforcement, teacher perception, student engagement, classroom interaction, EFL teaching, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

Engagement is widely recognized as one of the most critical factors influencing students' academic success, particularly in language learning contexts. In English as Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, engagement reflects the willingness of learners to devote sustained attention, effort, and emotional involvement to classroom activities (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). High levels of engagement are associated with better language acquisition, stronger communication skills, and improved academic performance (Wang & Eccles, 2013). However, maintaining such engagement in Indonesian junior high schools remains a persistent challenge. Many students experience difficulties arising from limited vocabulary, grammatical complexity, low self-confidence, and minimal exposure to authentic English usage outside the classroom (Astuti, 2016; Alwasilah, 2013).

These challenges are further compounded by socio-emotional factors. Adolescents in EFL classrooms often face insecurities about making mistakes in front of peers, a fear of

negative evaluation, and varying levels of motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). In such contexts, teachers must employ strategies that not only address cognitive learning goals but also nurture students' emotional well-being and motivation. One of the most effective strategies for doing so is reinforcement.

Reinforcement refers to the use of verbal or non-verbal responses by teachers to encourage desirable behaviors, participation, and performance. Rooted in behaviorist learning theory, particularly the work of Skinner (1953), reinforcement is defined as any stimulus that increases the likelihood of a behavioral response being repeated. While early applications of reinforcement emphasized tangible rewards, modern EFL pedagogy recognizes a broader range, including praise, gestures, attention, and emotional support (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). For example, a simple "Well done" or a supportive smile can have a significant positive impact on student motivation and willingness to participate.

However, the effectiveness of reinforcement is not merely a matter of applying techniques. Teachers' perceptions of reinforcement how they understand it, when they choose to use it, and why are shaped by their beliefs, teaching experiences, and the socio-cultural norms of the school environment (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). In Indonesia, where teacher–student relationships are often influenced by cultural expectations of respect, authority, and harmony (Holliday, 1994), the way reinforcement is perceived and practiced may differ significantly from Western models. This makes it essential to examine reinforcement from the perspective of teachers themselves.

While previous studies have examined reinforcement primarily from psychological or experimental perspectives (Skinner, 1953; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Bandura, 1997), fewer have explored its application in EFL classrooms through the lived experiences of teachers. Recent research has highlighted that teacher support and emotional engagement are vital for fostering sustained student involvement in language learning (Wang et al., 2022; Zhang & Hu, 2025). Nevertheless, there is still a gap in understanding how EFL teachers in Indonesian junior high schools conceptualize and implement reinforcement to enhance engagement. Hence this study aims to explore the teacher's perception of reinforcement and its role in fostering student engagement.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on EFL pedagogy by offering qualitative insights into how reinforcement is understood and applied in the Indonesian junior high school context. Its novelty lies in focusing on both teacher and student perceptions, thereby capturing a more holistic view of the classroom dynamic. The findings can inform teacher training programs, helping educators develop reinforcement strategies that are culturally responsive and pedagogically effective. Furthermore, by situating reinforcement within the socio-emotional and cultural realities of Indonesian classrooms, this research offers implications for improving engagement in similar educational contexts worldwide.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach, aiming to capture the teacher's perception in a natural, contextualized manner. Unlike experimental or quantitative methods, qualitative research allows for the exploration of meaning, beliefs, and lived experiences, making it particularly suitable for understanding how a teacher views and applies reinforcement (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). A descriptive qualitative approach as described by Sandelowski (2000), which aims to provide a comprehensive, detailed account of the phenomenon under investigation. Through interviews and classroom observations, the researcher sought to gain nuanced insights into how positive teacher reinforcement influences

student engagement in English language learning.

Research Site and Participant

The study was conducted at SMPN 40 Makassar, a public junior high school in Indonesia. The participant was one male English teacher with several years of teaching experience at the eighth-grade level. He was chosen through purposive sampling based on his active teaching role, availability, and willingness to engage in in-depth reflection on his teaching practices.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from the teacher. The participant was assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and all identifying information was excluded from the published findings. The research adhered to ethical guidelines for qualitative research.

Data Collection Techniques

Two primary data collection methods were used:

1. Semi-structured interview: The interview consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore the teacher's understanding of reinforcement, the types of reinforcement he uses, and his views on how reinforcement affects student behavior and engagement. The interview was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, recorded, and later transcribed and translated into English.
2. Classroom observations: A total of six classroom observations were conducted over a period of three weeks. The observations focused on teacher-student interaction, specifically identifying instances of verbal and non-verbal reinforcement. Detailed field notes were taken, and observation checklists were used to categorize the types and frequency of reinforcement strategies.

Data Analysis Technique

Data were analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2018) model, which includes three concurrent flows of activity:

1. Data reduction: Selecting, simplifying, and organizing the relevant information from interview and observation notes.
2. Data display: Categorizing and arranging data into themes, particularly around the teacher's perceived functions of reinforcement and its observed effects on students.
3. Conclusion drawing and verification: Interpreting the meaning of data and verifying themes through cross-referencing between interview and observation data (triangulation).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

1. Teacher's Perception of Reinforcement

The teacher described reinforcement as a key motivational strategy to create a dynamic and responsive learning environment. His perspective extended beyond behavior control; he viewed reinforcement as a relational and emotional tool.

The teacher viewed reinforcement as a strategy that goes beyond controlling behavior, emphasizing its role in building students' confidence and enjoyment in learning. She expressed that reinforcement should make students "feel proud of themselves" rather than fearful of making mistakes.

“For me, reinforcement is not only to make them behave, but to make them feel proud of themselves. I want them to enjoy learning, not be afraid.” (Teacher Interview, T-03)

In addition, she emphasized the importance of sincerity in delivering praise, highlighting that students can sense whether feedback is genuine:

“Praise must be sincere. If it’s just words without meaning, students will feel it, and it won’t motivate them.” (Teacher Interview, T-05)

The teacher also linked reinforcement to emotional connection, stating that her presence and attention create a supportive environment:

“Sometimes just by being close, smiling, or giving a nod, students know I appreciate their effort. That’s also reinforcement.” (Teacher Interview, T-07)

These responses suggest that the teacher’s perception integrates both behaviorist and humanistic principles combining Skinner’s (1953) emphasis on stimulus–response with the importance of emotional engagement (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002).

He emphasized that reinforcement must be genuine and delivered with care. Empty praise or mechanical gestures, he noted, lose their value. His understanding of reinforcement included creating a positive atmosphere where students feel emotionally safe and academically supported.

This view aligns with Bandura’s social cognitive theory, which posits that learners observe, interpret, and are influenced by social cues in their environment. The teacher’s intent to foster a supportive climate reflects her awareness of the emotional and psychological dimensions of learning.

2. Types of Reinforcement Used

Analysis of interview and observation data revealed that the teacher regularly employed two main categories of reinforcement: verbal and non-verbal.

a. Verbal Reinforcement

Examples include:

- a) Praise (“Excellent!”, “Good answer!”, “You did great.”)
- b) Positive labeling (“That’s creative.”, “You’re improving.”)
- c) Name calling in a positive tone (“Well done, Rani.”)

During the first observed class, when a student hesitated before answering a grammar question, the teacher said:

“Don’t worry, just try. Whatever your answer is, I appreciate the effort.”

This kind of verbal reinforcement supports Deci and Ryan’s Self-Determination Theory, especially the need for competence and relatedness. By acknowledging effort, not just correctness, the teacher was reinforcing the process of learning itself.

b. Non-Verbal Reinforcement

Observation data revealed various forms of non-verbal reinforcement used by the teacher to sustain engagement. Table 1 summarizes these types and examples observed in six classroom sessions.

Table 1. Types of Non-Verbal Reinforcement

Types of Non-Verbal Reinforcement	Example Observed	Frequency Across Six Sessions
Smiling	Teacher smiles when a student answers correctly	5
Nodding	Teacher nods in approval after a student reads aloud	4
Thumbs-up gesture	Teacher gives thumbs-up after group work presentation	3
Approaching a student's desk	Teacher walks toward a struggling student to show support	4
Light touch on shoulder	Teacher gently pats a student's shoulder to encourage them	2
Clapping	Teacher claps along with the class to celebrate a correct answer	3

These gestures were often paired with verbal praise, creating a multi-modal form of reinforcement that supported both cognitive and emotional engagement.

3. Reinforcement and Student Engagement

The teacher perceived a strong connection between reinforcement and the three dimensions of engagement as defined by Fredricks et al. (2004):

a. Behavioral Engagement

Reinforcement was seen to increase student participation in class activities. After receiving praise or recognition, students were more likely to raise their hands, respond to questions, and take initiative in group tasks.

“When I praise one student, others get motivated too. They start thinking, ‘Maybe I can try too.’”

This domino effect was particularly evident in observed group discussions, where students who were reinforced early in the activity became leaders in encouraging their peers.

b. Emotional Engagement

Students responded positively to reinforcement with visible joy, laughter, or nodding in return. The teacher noted that this emotional bond was critical for sustained interest in English learning.

“If they feel I care about their progress, they become more confident and relaxed. That makes learning easier.”

Observations confirmed that students often smiled after being praised or responded more cheerfully during follow-up tasks.

c. Cognitive Engagement

The teacher shared that reinforcement motivated students to think more deeply and respond more thoughtfully.

“Some students surprise me. When I give feedback, they reflect and try again with better answers.”

In one observed session, after being praised for using a complete sentence, a student raised his hand again to use more complex vocabulary. This demonstrates reinforcement's role in promoting metacognition and risk-taking in language use.

4. Reinforcement as a Culturally Responsive Practice

The teacher also acknowledged the cultural context of his classroom. He mentioned that Indonesian students often feel reluctant to speak up due to fear of embarrassment. Thus, he adapted his reinforcement strategies to be gentle and encouraging, rather than overly evaluative.

“Some students will shut down if you criticize them directly. So I try to lift them up first, and then guide them.”

This perspective reveals a culturally responsive pedagogy, where the teacher adjusts his strategies based on students' affective needs and social background. It also supports the constructivist view that teaching is not one-size-fits-all, but must consider learner variability.

5. Challenges and Reflections

Despite the teachers' commitment to using reinforcement, he expressed some challenges:

- a) Reinforcement sometimes loses effect if overused or not individualized.
- b) Managing reinforcement for large classes requires balance and awareness.
- c) Students may become dependent on external praise if intrinsic motivation is not gradually built.

He concluded that the teacher's emotional presence, empathy, and sensitivity are crucial in using reinforcement effectively.

Discussions

The findings of this study reveal that the teacher perceives reinforcement as a holistic pedagogical tool, not merely as a mechanism to control classroom behavior. The teacher stated, *“For me, reinforcement is not only to make them behave, but to make them feel proud of themselves. I want them to enjoy learning, not be afraid.”* This perception highlights an intention to promote positive emotions, self-confidence, and intrinsic motivation among

students. The teacher further explained, *“Sometimes when they answer incorrectly, I still give a smile or a gentle nod to show that their effort matters. I want them to try again without feeling embarrassed.”* These remarks indicate that reinforcement is framed as an encouragement toward persistence and resilience rather than a transactional exchange for correct answers.

This orientation aligns with Skinner’s (1953) behaviorist view of reinforcement as a stimulus to strengthen desired behaviors, but it also moves beyond the purely behavioral dimension. The teacher’s approach resonates with Deci and Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory, which posits that motivation thrives when learners experience competence, relatedness, and autonomy. By giving praise, offering warm gestures, and ensuring emotional presence, the teacher aims to meet students’ basic psychological needs, fostering not only behavioral compliance but also emotional and cognitive engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Fredricks et al. (2004) emphasized that engagement comprises behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. The teacher’s perception demonstrates a strong focus on emotional engagement seen in efforts to create an atmosphere where students feel valued and supported. For example, during observations, the teacher was frequently seen using non-verbal cues such as smiling, giving thumbs-up gestures, and maintaining friendly eye contact when students contributed to class discussions. Such behaviors are consistent with the findings of Wang et al. (2022), who reported that teacher warmth and support are significant predictors of student engagement in language learning environments.

The teacher also framed reinforcement as an empathetic act. As she stated, *“Every child is different. Some need loud applause; others just need a quiet word of encouragement.”* This flexibility in approach reflects an understanding that reinforcement must be personalized to match individual student needs. It mirrors the perspective of Hattie and Timperley (2007), who found that effective feedback whether verbal or non-verbal, depends on its relevance and timing for each learner.

From a cultural perspective, the teacher’s reinforcement practices align with the Indonesian context, where collectivist values prioritize group harmony and social approval. Actions such as clapping softly for group achievements and nodding in approval of collective efforts reflect this cultural sensitivity. This supports Bandura’s (1986) social learning theory, which highlights the role of modeling and observational learning students imitate positive responses when they see peers being recognized in socially harmonious ways. Similar cultural considerations have been observed in other Southeast Asian EFL classrooms (Nguyen, 2019; Astuti & Lammers, 2017; Putri & Arham, 2024), where reinforcement is often designed to avoid public embarrassment while maintaining student motivation.

Furthermore, the teacher’s perception is grounded in the belief that reinforcement can shift students’ attitudes toward English from fear to enjoyment. She commented, *“When they feel safe and appreciated, they dare to speak. Even shy students can surprise you if you make them feel that mistakes are okay.”* This is in line with Dörnyei’s (2005) motivational framework, which underscores the importance of reducing language anxiety and creating a supportive classroom climate. In summary, the teacher perceives reinforcement as:

1. An emotional connector – building trust and rapport to support risk-taking in language use.
2. A motivator for persistence – encouraging continued effort despite mistakes.
3. A culturally responsive practice – balancing individual recognition with group harmony.

These perceptions fulfill the study's objective of exploring how reinforcement is understood and applied in an Indonesian junior high school EFL setting. The interpretation of results also confirms earlier studies (Ali & Anwar, 2023; Zhang & Hu, 2025) showing that reinforcement strategies combining emotional warmth and pedagogical consistency are most effective for sustaining engagement.

Limitations of this finding include the reliance on data from a single teacher within one institutional context, which restricts generalizability. Additionally, the absence of quantitative measures limits the ability to correlate reinforcement with measurable gains in achievement.

Theoretical implications suggest that reinforcement should be understood not only as a behaviorist tool but also as an affective and cultural construct within EFL pedagogy. Practical implications for teachers include adopting diverse reinforcement strategies both verbal and non-verbal while considering student personality and cultural norms. Future research should investigate reinforcement perceptions across multiple schools and regions in Indonesia, compare novice and experienced teachers' approaches, and integrate mixed-method designs that measure both engagement and achievement outcomes. Studies could also examine how digital learning environments influence the use and perception of reinforcement.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the central role of reinforcement in fostering student engagement, as perceived by an experienced English teacher at SMPN 40 Makassar. Through verbal and non-verbal strategies, the teacher created a classroom atmosphere that nurtured confidence, encouraged risk-taking, and promoted both academic and emotional growth. The teacher viewed reinforcement not as a mechanical technique but as a relational act a way of building trust, showing appreciation, and acknowledging student effort. His perception aligns with established learning theories, including those of Skinner, Bandura, Deci & Ryan, and Fredricks et al., and confirms the multidimensional impact reinforcement can have on behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. This study contributes to the understanding of how reinforcement is conceptualized and implemented in Indonesian EFL contexts. It suggests that reinforcement should be applied with intentionality, responsiveness, and cultural sensitivity. Future research may consider exploring students' long-term motivational shifts in response to reinforcement, or how different forms of reinforcement affect learners with varied linguistic proficiency.

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