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The Application and Effectiveness of Reward-Based Techniques in Malay Language Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT: this study explores how reward techniques are applied and how effective they are in teaching and learning the Malay Language at Tamil vernacular schools (SJKT) in the Seremban district. Using a qualitative approach, the research involved semi-structured interviews and classroom observations with selected Malay Language teachers. The interview protocols and observation checklists were reviewed by experts in the field to ensure validity, and data triangulation was carried out through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Thematic analysis was then used to identify and interpret emerging patterns from the data. The findings show that teachers mostly used tangible rewards, such as gifts and stationery, along with social rewards like praise and encouragement, to motivate pupils. These reward strategies helped increase student engagement, nurture positive learning behaviour, and make teaching more effective.

KEYWORDS: Reward Techniques; Malay Language Teaching; Student Motivation; Classroom Engagement; Tamil Vernacular Schools (SJKT); Qualitative Research; Thematic Analysis

INTRODUCTION

The Integrated Primary School Curriculum (KBSR) was first introduced as a pilot project in 1982 as part of Malaysia's educational reform aimed at strengthening the teaching and learning process (Mohamad Mohsin Mohamad Said & Nasruddin Yunos, 2008). Since then, classroom management has been recognised as a key element in ensuring that the objectives of the National Philosophy of Education are effectively achieved. However, despite the extensive discussion on reinforcement theory in educational psychology, limited empirical studies have specifically examined the structured application of reward techniques in Malay Language classrooms within Tamil vernacular school settings. This gap highlights the need to explore how reinforcement strategies are contextualised in multilingual learning environments and how they influence pupil engagement and behavioural outcomes.

One of the crucial aspects of classroom management involves managing pupil behaviour and motivation. B.F. Skinner's Operant Conditioning Theory highlights the role of reinforcement in shaping desirable behaviours and sustaining pupils' engagement in learning (Ashma Said et al., 2023). Within this framework, reward techniques such as verbal praise, tokens, and tangible incentives are considered effective tools for enhancing pupil motivation, maintaining classroom discipline, and promoting positive behaviour. In the context of Malay Language education, particularly in vernacular schools, the use of reward techniques can help address challenges such as low pupil engagement, limited motivation, and inconsistent discipline. By employing appropriate reward strategies, teachers can foster a more stimulating and supportive learning environment where pupils are motivated to participate actively, perform better academically, and demonstrate constructive behaviours. In light of these considerations, this study aims to examine the application and effectiveness of reward techniques employed by Malay Language teachers in Tamil vernacular schools (SJKT) in the Seremban district. Specifically, it investigates how rewards are implemented during classroom teaching and learning, their impact on pupil motivation and behaviour, and the extent to which they contribute to improving the overall quality of teaching and learning.

Problem Statement

Teachers today possess varying levels of skills that are shaped by different competency developments. This is reflected in a study by Wan Fadhlurrahman W. Md Rasidi, Al Amin Mydin, and Aziah Ismail (2020), which found that teachers' professional practices in classroom management are generally at a high level. However, some teachers still lack in-depth knowledge of the types and importance of reinforcement techniques in the classroom. This gap poses challenges during the teaching and learning process.

One of the main challenges is that some pupils are less active during lessons when teachers rely solely on verbal positive reinforcement. This is because pupils respond differently to reinforcement strategies. For instance, while some pupils react positively to verbal praise, others require more varied forms of rewards to stay motivated. Such differences can disrupt classroom control and

reduce the effectiveness of teaching and learning, especially when interpersonal relationships between teachers and pupils are not well established. Consequently, teachers may struggle to achieve learning objectives when pupils ignore instructions or exhibit disruptive behaviours that interfere with the flow of lessons. The ineffectiveness of learning is often linked to changes in pupils' behaviour and motivation.

According to Brophy (as cited in Abdul Said & Kalbeh, 2017), pupils in a classroom display wide differences in interests, priorities, and ability levels. The loss of classroom control during T&L can easily lead to disruptive behaviours among pupils, resulting in a lack of focus and non-compliance with teacher instructions. This issue may stem from pupils becoming overly dependent on verbal praise and feeling motivated only when it is given. Over time, repeated use of verbal reinforcement may lead to boredom, prompting pupils to engage in off-task behaviours such as chatting with peers. When reinforcement lacks variety, it provides little incentive for active engagement. As a result, pupils' motivation to participate meaningfully in the T&L process declines, which negatively affects their overall learning experience.

Research Objectives and Questions

This study is guided by two primary objectives. The first is to investigate how reinforcement strategies are applied by Malay Language teachers during the teaching and learning process, with particular focus on classroom implementation in SJKT schools. The second objective is to assess the effectiveness of these reinforcement strategies in promoting pupil engagement, participation, and motivation throughout Malay Language lessons. Together, these objectives aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how structured reward techniques influence both teaching practices and student learning outcomes.

Research Questions

In line with the study's objectives, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How are reinforcement strategies applied by Malay Language teachers in the teaching and learning process at SJKT schools?
2. To what extent do these reinforcement strategies influence pupil engagement, participation, and motivation during Malay Language lessons?

METHODOLOGY

To investigate how reward-based techniques are applied and their effectiveness in Malay as a second language teaching in SJKT classrooms, a qualitative case study design was employed. This approach was chosen because it provides in-depth, contextualised insights into teachers' pedagogical practices and pupils' responses within authentic classroom environments, allowing the study to capture both the implementation and the impact of reward strategies. The study involved three Malay Language teachers from SJKT schools in Seremban, each with at least five years of teaching experience. Participants were purposively selected based on their consistent use of reward techniques in their teaching. Their respective classes were included in the study to observe real-time classroom dynamics and pupils' engagement with the reward strategies. Data were gathered using three complementary methods. First, document analysis was conducted on lesson plans to identify how reward strategies were deliberately integrated into lesson designs. Second, classroom observations captured the types, frequency, and implementation of rewards, along with pupils' responses and behaviours during lessons. Third, semi-structured interviews provided in-depth insights into teachers' perceptions, rationales, and experiences regarding the effectiveness of reward techniques in motivating pupils and enhancing learning outcomes. All data were analysed thematically through systematic coding, categorisation, and identification of patterns emerging across the three data sources. Triangulation was employed to ensure credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness by cross-checking evidence from lesson plans, observations, and interview transcripts. Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Teachers were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and all collected data were used exclusively for research purposes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are organised into three major themes derived from thematic analysis: (1) types of reward strategies used, (2) impact on student motivation and engagement, and (3) behavioural and social outcomes. These themes emerged consistently across lesson plan analysis, classroom observations, and semi-structured interview data. The analysis was conducted in alignment with the research objectives and guided by thematic procedures to identify recurring patterns across data sources. Methodological triangulation was employed to enhance the depth and credibility of interpretation by integrating evidence from lesson plans, observational field notes, and interview transcripts. The collected data were carefully examined to answer the research questions. Data triangulation in this study involved the integration of three primary sources: lesson plan analysis, classroom observations during teaching sessions, and semi-structured interviews with the participants. Each data source provided a unique perspective, complementing one another and enabling the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of teachers' use of reward techniques, as well as their impact on pupil motivation, engagement, and behaviour. The structured use of verbal, symbolic, and tangible rewards reflects the foundational principles of Skinner's Operant Conditioning Theory, which emphasises that behaviour

is strengthened through positive reinforcement. The analysis revealed that teachers consistently employed three primary categories of reward-based reinforcement strategies: verbal, symbolic, and tangible rewards. Analysis of lesson plans, classroom observations, and interviews revealed that teachers deliberately employed three main types of rewards: verbal, symbolic, and tangible each contributing differently to students' learning behaviours. Verbal praise was the most frequently observed reinforcement strategy. Teachers used affirmations such as "good job," "excellent," and "well done" immediately after pupils demonstrated correct responses or active participation. The immediacy of praise appeared to reinforce desirable behaviours effectively, encouraging pupils to continue participating in classroom activities. Symbolic rewards included stickers, reward stamps, star charts, and group applause. These visible acknowledgments of achievement created a sense of accomplishment among pupils. Observations indicated that symbolic rewards promoted healthy competition and sustained engagement, particularly during quiz-based or collaborative tasks. Tangible rewards, such as small gifts and stationery items, were used more selectively. Teachers explained that tangible incentives were particularly effective in motivating fewer active pupils and sustaining attention during more demanding tasks. Unlike verbal praise, tangible rewards were applied strategically to prevent over-reliance. The immediate and consistent application of rewards observed in this study supports the theoretical assertion that reinforcement increases the likelihood of repeated desirable behaviours in classroom settings.

Table 4.1: Reward Techniques Applied by Participant 1 (PK1) and Their Observed Effectiveness

Instrument	Reward Technique	Effectiveness
Lesson Plan	•Apply the reward technique as positive reinforcement for pupils who can correctly identify basic words according to the given materials. • Apply the reward technique to pupils who succeed in quiz-based enrichment activities. • Acknowledgement for pupils demonstrating active participation and cooperation until the end of the lesson.	- Pupils felt encouraged to answer questions correctly. - Pupils actively participated in Teaching and Learning Process. - Pupils were motivated to volunteer and answer in front of the class.
Observation	- Verbal praise - Stickers - Applause	- Pupils confidently raised hands and attempted questions.
Interview	- Stickers -Verbal rewards (praise) - Tangible rewards (gifts)	- Pupils more focused and motivated. - Pupils became more diligent and confident. - Pupils showed positive behaviour and initiative.

Analysis of PK1's lesson plan showed that the teacher carefully planned several reward strategies to support pupil engagement and learning. Pupils who correctly identified root words or performed well in enrichment quizzes were praised verbally, and those who remained active and cooperative throughout the lesson were also acknowledged. These rewards were not random; they were deliberately built into the lesson to encourage pupils to participate, speak up confidently, and take initiative in classroom activities. Classroom observations confirmed what was seen in the lesson plans. PK1 consistently used verbal praise, stickers, and applause to reinforce positive behaviour. The pupils responded very positively, they were more confident, enthusiastic, and willing to answer questions. Even pupils who were usually quiet or passive started to participate more, showing that the rewards helped them feel included and motivated. Interview data further supported these findings. PK1 explained that small tangible rewards, like gifts, worked alongside verbal praise to keep pupils motivated and focused. Pupils were not only more attentive and diligent but also showed initiative and better behaviour overall. PK1's mix of verbal, symbolic, and tangible rewards created a lively and supportive classroom environment. Pupils became more confident, engaged, and willing to contribute, showing that well-planned rewards can make a real difference in both learning and behaviour.

Table 4.2: Reward Techniques Applied by Participant 2 (PK2) and Their Observed Effectiveness

Instrument	Reward Technique	Effectiveness
Lesson Plan	- Rewards for identifying sentence errors correctly. - Group rewards for correcting paragraph errors.	- Pupils raised hands more frequently and answered correctly. - Pupils stayed engaged until the end of lessons.

Instrument	Reward Technique	Effectiveness
Observation	- Verbal praise - Star stickers - small gifts - Applause	- Pupils worked harder and remained motivated.
Interview	- Giving stars - small gifts	- Pupils happier and more involved. - Increased motivation and interest. - Healthy competition among peers. - Improved academic performance.

Analysis of PK2's lesson plan revealed that the teacher deliberately employed both individual and group reward strategies to enhance pupil engagement and learning outcomes. Pupils who accurately identified sentence errors were acknowledged individually, while group rewards were provided for collaboratively correcting paragraph errors. This combination of individual and collective reinforcement encouraged students to focus more attentively on the tasks, participate actively, and sustain engagement throughout the lesson. Consequently, pupils raised their hands more frequently, responded correctly to questions, and maintained concentration until the conclusion of the lesson.

Classroom observations corroborated these findings, showing that PK2 consistently applied verbal praise, star stickers, small tangible gifts, and applause as reinforcement tools. Pupils responded positively, demonstrating increased effort, sustained motivation, and greater persistence in completing tasks. The integration of both individual and group rewards fostered a sense of friendly competition, prompting pupils to strive for success while simultaneously supporting and encouraging their peers.

Insights from interviews provided further evidence of the effectiveness of these strategies. PK2 explained that providing stars and small tangible rewards not only maintained pupils' interest but also enhanced their willingness to participate actively in lessons. Pupils appeared happier, more engaged, and demonstrated greater initiative and enthusiasm. The reward strategies contributed to improved behaviour, collaboration, and social interaction within the classroom. In addition, pupils showed increased academic performance, particularly in tasks requiring careful attention, accuracy, and active participation. Overall, PK2's systematic and thoughtful application of both individual and group reward strategies effectively enhanced pupil motivation, classroom engagement, and participation. The combination of verbal, symbolic, and tangible rewards created a dynamic, supportive, and inclusive learning environment that promoted both academic achievement and positive social development.

Table 4.3: Reward Techniques Applied by Participant 3 (PK3) and Their Observed Effectiveness

Instrument	Reward Technique	Effectiveness
Lesson Plan	PK3 give rewards by verbally praising students who successfully recall previous lessons. • PK3 applies reward techniques to students who successfully share their understanding of pictures and materials given. • PK3 applies the reward technique to students who write correct sentences with accurate spelling.	•The classroom atmosphere becomes livelier and more spirited. •Encourages students to be confident in expressing opinions and interacting actively. •The classroom is filled with a sense of excitement. • Students share their knowledge more confidently. • Encourages students to work harder to understand learning materials. • Motivates passive students to participate actively and share their views.
Observation	• PK3 applies the reward technique by verbally praising students, giving stickers, and also small gifts.	- Pupils more confident, persistent, and involved.
Interview	- Verbal praise • Small gifts • Reward stamps • Stickers • Group claps	Reward techniques help to overcome behavioural problems among students. • Noticeable improvement in their attitudes. • Students are more dedicated in completing homework and given tasks. • Students tend to continue working hard in the same way.

Instrument	Reward Technique	Effectiveness
		• Reward techniques create a more inclusive learning environment. • Students support one another. • Students cooperate better.

Analysis of PK3's lesson plan revealed that the teacher intentionally integrated a variety of reward strategies to enhance pupil participation and learning outcomes. Verbal praise was used to acknowledge pupils who successfully recalled previous lessons, while additional rewards were provided for those who shared their understanding of learning materials and produced correct sentences with accurate spelling. These strategically planned reinforcements contributed to a lively and enthusiastic classroom atmosphere, fostering pupils' confidence in expressing ideas and actively participating in classroom discussions. Even pupils who were typically passive demonstrated greater willingness to engage, indicating that the reward strategies promoted inclusivity and self-assurance.

Classroom observations confirmed the effective implementation of these strategies. PK3 consistently applied verbal praise, stickers, and small tangible gifts to reinforce positive behaviours and learning efforts. Pupils responded positively, demonstrating heightened confidence, persistence, and attentiveness throughout the lesson. The combination of verbal, symbolic, and tangible rewards maintained their motivation, encouraged active participation, and supported sustained engagement in all classroom activities.

Insights from interviews further highlighted the teacher's reflective and deliberate use of multiple reinforcement techniques, including verbal praise, small gifts, reward stamps, stickers, and group applause. PK3 explained that these strategies not only motivated pupils to attempt new tasks and complete assignments diligently, but also fostered self-discipline, cooperation, and peer support. The reward techniques contributed to a more inclusive and collaborative classroom environment, where pupils encouraged one another and actively participated in group learning. The structured application of these rewards was observed to improve pupils' attitudes, promote positive social interactions, and cultivate a supportive classroom culture.

Overall, PK3's integration of diverse reward strategies demonstrated significant pedagogical and behavioural benefits. By combining verbal, symbolic, and tangible rewards, the teacher effectively enhanced pupil motivation, engagement, and learning behaviour. The findings suggest that well-planned reward techniques act as a catalyst for both cognitive engagements, such as accurate written work and application of knowledge, and behavioural engagement, including collaboration, persistence, and adherence to classroom norms. This evidence underscores the potential of reward-based strategies to create a dynamic, inclusive, and supportive learning environment that fosters academic achievement and positive social development.

Effectiveness of Reward-Based Techniques in Enhancing Pupil Motivation, Engagement, and Behaviour

Analysis of lesson plans, classroom observations, and interviews revealed that verbal praise was the most frequently applied reward strategy. Teachers used affirmations such as "good job," "excellent," and "well done" immediately after pupils demonstrated correct responses or active participation. For example, PK1 praised pupils who correctly identified root words or actively participated in enrichment quizzes, while PK3 acknowledged students who recalled previous lessons or shared their understanding of learning materials. These affirmations encouraged pupils to speak up confidently, participate more willingly, and demonstrate initiative during classroom activities. Classroom observations confirmed that pupils responded positively, showing increased enthusiasm and confidence, with even typically passive students becoming more engaged. Teachers emphasized during interviews that verbal praise not only motivated students in the moment but also sustained their interest across lessons, fostering a supportive and inclusive classroom culture. These findings align with Skinner's Operant Conditioning Theory, which posits that behaviours are strengthened through positive reinforcement, and echo prior research indicating that structured verbal reinforcement enhances motivation and academic engagement (Siti Fauziah Mohd Amin et al., 2020).

Symbolic rewards, including stickers, reward stamps, star charts, and group applause, were deliberately incorporated into lesson plans to visually acknowledge achievement and encourage participation. Observations showed that these rewards promoted friendly competition, maintained attention during collaborative or quiz-based tasks, and reinforced positive behaviours among pupils. For instance, PK2 applied group rewards for collaboratively correcting paragraph errors, which resulted in more pupils raising their hands and staying engaged until the end of lessons. Interview insights revealed that teachers perceived symbolic rewards as an effective complement to verbal praise, helping to sustain motivation and create a dynamic learning atmosphere. Literature also supports this approach, highlighting that symbolic recognition enhances engagement, self-confidence, and persistence in learning (Wibisono et al., 2021).

Tangible incentives, such as small gifts and stationery items, were used selectively to motivate fewer active pupils or to maintain focus during demanding tasks. Teachers reported that tangible rewards, when combined with verbal and symbolic reinforcement, effectively maintained pupil attention and encouraged completion of assigned tasks. Observations confirmed that pupils responded with greater diligence and enthusiasm when tangible rewards were incorporated, with increased participation and improved classroom behaviour. Interviews with PK1 and PK3 emphasized that the strategic use of tangible rewards prevented over-reliance

and promoted intrinsic motivation, while still providing recognition for effort and achievement. These findings are consistent with prior studies suggesting that tangible rewards, when thoughtfully applied, can enhance both behavioural engagement and academic output (Siti Fauziah Mohd Amin et al., 2020; Wibisono et al., 2021).

Across all three participants, the combined use of verbal, symbolic, and tangible rewards contributed significantly to pupil motivation and engagement. Pupils demonstrated greater willingness to answer questions, participate in discussions, and complete written exercises with accuracy. Initially passive students became more proactive, exhibiting persistence and confidence in learning tasks. Structured rewards encouraged students to take responsibility for their own learning, recall prior knowledge, and apply language skills effectively. Interviews further revealed that teachers perceived these strategies as critical in sustaining motivation over time and in promoting a positive attitude towards learning. These findings suggest that well-planned reward techniques enhance both cognitive engagements, reflected in the quality of written work, and behavioural engagement, reflected in sustained participation and effort during classroom activities.

Reward strategies also had a notable impact on classroom behaviour and social interactions. Pupils were observed to cooperate more, support one another during group tasks, and adhere to classroom expectations. PK3's diverse use of verbal praise, stickers, reward stamps, small gifts, and group applause created an inclusive learning environment that encouraged collaboration, self-discipline, and constructive peer interaction. Teachers noted that these techniques not only addressed disruptive behaviour but also strengthened interpersonal relationships and fostered a sense of shared responsibility among pupils. The findings confirm that deliberate reward strategies can shape positive behavioural patterns, reinforce desired conduct, and create a harmonious learning environment, supporting previous research linking structured reinforcement with improved classroom dynamics and pupil confidence (Siti Fauziah Mohd Amin et al., 2020; Wibisono et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the integration of diverse reward strategies, including verbal, symbolic and tangible techniques, serves as an effective pedagogical approach that enhances pupil motivation while strengthening classroom interaction, confidence and academic achievement. The deliberate and consistent application of these techniques contributes to a supportive, inclusive and stimulating learning environment, affirming their relevance and effectiveness in contemporary Malay language pedagogy. This study further reinforces the applicability of Skinner's Operant Conditioning Theory in modern classroom contexts, demonstrating that positive reinforcement can significantly improve pupils' engagement, motivation and learning behaviour.

The findings provide practical guidance for the Ministry of Education Malaysia, the Institute of Teacher Education Malaysia, lecturers and teachers in optimizing the use of reward strategies in teaching and learning. Moreover, the study contributes to existing literature by offering empirical insights into the implementation of reward techniques within Malay language education.

For future research, it is recommended that quantitative or mixed-methods designs be employed to generate more comprehensive and holistic findings. Further studies could expand to include teachers of other subjects and Malay language teachers from different states to obtain a broader and more representative understanding. Additionally, future research should explore other reinforcement mechanisms such as negative reinforcement, punishment, extinction and the Premack Principle, while also incorporating Self-Determination Theory by Deci and Ryan to further enrich the analysis of pupil motivation and engagement.

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