Influence of Reinforcement in English Language Learning at Primary Level of Education in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT
This research focuses on the effect of reinforcement during English Language Learning (ELL) classroom activities of Bangladeshi primary level education. The findings of the research indicate that teachers follow both positive and negative reinforcement as part of their teaching-learning activities depending on the actual situation of the class. Positive reinforcement helps students to enhance their mental growth and also boost their learning behaviour. There are some negative influences on students’ behaviour when the teacher treats them with any kind of negative reinforcement. Although all the teachers believe that positive reinforcement helps to improve motivation, self-confidence, classroom participation, teacher-student relationship and effective learning of students during ELL classroom activities, a few teachers still use negative phrases which demotivate students towards learning rather than creating the eagerness to learn.

Keywords: English language learning, primary education, reinforcement, motivation
1. Introduction

Education is the topmost priority of government initiatives, especially in the primary education sector in Bangladesh because it has been considered to lay the foundations of the students’ ability. The government has taken the fullest responsibilities to ensure quality primary education for every child throughout the country and is strongly committed to ensuring Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. According to *EFA National Review 2015-Bangladesh*, outstanding improvement has been documented in primary education enrolment reaching 97% by 2013 whereas the net primary enrolment rate was only 51% during the 1970s as recorded by World Bank. Although the government is close to achieving universal enrolment, the institutionalization of quality still remains difficult to attain. Along with Bangla and Mathematics, English is one of the compulsory subjects from the beginning of primary level of education in Bangladesh, but English seems to be more difficult for young children because of language deficiency of these children and failure of teachers to conduct classroom activities in pleasurable and effective ways.

Learning English is one of the basic requirements for a student from the initial grade in the country to make themselves ready for a competitive world and also to be a member of the global society. Bangladesh is trying to impart English language proficiency among learners by including English as a compulsory subject from Grade 1 of primary education cycle. According to *National Curriculum 2012*, the purpose of teaching English at primary level is to help students to develop good competence in all four skills in English through meaningful and enjoyable activities. It is also hoped that ELL activities during classroom performance will encourage the development of students’ communication skills and help them to grow international mentality for challenging
world situations. However, the quality of English Language Learning (ELL) is not satisfactory enough because of several reasons. Reinforcement during classroom activities is one of the most important reasons which plays both positive and negative roles in language learning.

Reinforcement is one of the most influential factors affecting student learning during classroom activities. Reinforcement has different meanings based on diverse situations, but in the teaching-learning process, reinforcement refers to some methods used by the teacher in the classroom to keep the attention of the student towards classroom activities and to motivate them towards learning. In other words, it is one of the ways by which teachers try to motivate students. There are two types of reinforcement: positive and negative. The ultimate aim of reinforcement is to stimulate students’ performance during classroom activities and to encourage them to acquire knowledge to make them prepared for the future world. Another important part of reinforcement is to make changes on student’s behaviour towards learning.

2. Literature Review

Different education specialists and psychologists describe reinforcement as a behavioural principle that describes the direct relationship between behaviour or action and the result of that action. Reinforcement is the way to encourage the students towards good performance or to discourage them to learn by using different types of techniques during classroom activities or outside the school compound. The main purpose of reinforcement is to activate the inner soul of a student, to make them aware about their knowing and also to inspire them not to make mistakes in future. The teacher in the primary classroom is the central character to play the main role in the mind of young children. Therefore, it is the teacher who uses different kinds of reinforcement during ELL classroom performance to
achieve the ultimate target of their classroom activities such as to ensure the practice of four skills that seem to be achieved by their students after the primary school phase or the specific class. Reinforcement affects the behaviour of students. There are mainly three outcomes that may occur after reinforcement:

1. Consequences which give Rewards increase a behaviour.
2. Consequences which give Punishments decrease a behaviour.
3. Consequences which give neither Rewards nor Punishments extinguish a behaviour.

(Source: Reinforcement Theory (n.d.))

2.1 Types of Reinforcement
There are mainly two types of reinforcement: positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement.

2.1.1 Positive Reinforcement: Positive reinforcement as a concept was introduced by the famous behaviourist Skinner (1953). Skinner’s idea was that if a person was rewarded for acting in a positive way, they would come to see that behaviour as the most natural and advantageous way to act. It refers to introducing a new stimulus to the subject’s environment in order to reward the desired behaviour. Therefore, positive reinforcement brings a pleasant or desirable response and increases the possibility that the response will be repeated (Wood, Wood, & Boyd, 2005). It associates a pleasant outcome with the desired outcome. Positive reinforcement can either be a reward for good behaviour or simply a positive communication in the form of praise or encouragement.

2.1.2 Negative Reinforcement: Negative reinforcement is also a concept that has been found in Skinner’s Operant Conditioning theory which encompasses eradicating a nasty incentive from the surroundings. According to Skinner (1953), negative reinforcement and punishment are not a similar phenomenon but different from diverse points of view.
Although numerous experts blend negative reinforcement with punishment, this is merely not correct. Instead, negative reinforcement serves to encourage a certain positive behaviour by taking away a negative stimulus. For instance, a person learns that leaving for work earlier prevents from getting stuck in traffic, and repeats this pattern with positive results. Therefore, negative reinforcement is giving an aversive stimulus when the response is not made or omitting the aversive stimulus when the response is made (Collins English Dictionary).

2.2 Skinner’s Reinforcement Theory

Skinner developed his reinforcement theory while working with lab rats in devices he called ‘Skinner boxes’. He discussed the following types of reinforcement:

2.2.1 Positive Reinforcement: Presenting a reward after a desired behaviour. Positive reinforcement is observed when a behaviour is followed by a consequence that increases the behaviour’s likelihood of reoccurring.

2.2.2 Negative Reinforcement: Taking away an aversive stimulus after the desired behaviour. Negative Reinforcement involves steps designed to lead one to an appropriate action in order to escape or avoid an unwanted consequence. In other words, the desired behaviour increases with the use of negative reinforcement.

2.2.3 Punishment: (1) Presenting an aversive stimulus contingent on a response; (2) Taking away a rewarding stimulus contingent on a response. An event is viewed as punishment only if it is followed by a consequence that decreases the behaviour over time.
Skinner used this reinforcement theory to alter the already existing Law of Effect in order to downplay the role of punishment in changing behaviour. Instead, he was convinced that behaviour could be altered by simply using positive and negative types of reinforcement. It should be noted that negative reinforcement is not equated with punishment. When either positive or negative reinforcement is used, the desired behaviour increases. When punishment is used, reoccurrence of a behaviour will decrease.

2.3 Principles of Reinforcement

Mather and Goldstein (2001) state that reinforcement and punishment follow a clear set of basic principles:

1. Reinforcement or punishment always follows behavior.
2. Reinforcement or punishment follows the target behaviour as soon as possible.
3. Reinforcement or punishment fits the target behaviour and must be meaningful to the child.
4. Multiple reinforces or punishments are likely to be more effective than single reinforces or punishments.

3. Research Questions

The core aim of this study is to explore the influence of providing reinforcement in primary level Grade-V classroom. To achieve this aim some specific research questions has been chosen which are recorded below:

a. What are the techniques of reinforcement during ELL followed by the teachers?
b. Is there any influence of reinforcement on students’ learning?
c. How reinforcement impacts on students’ learning?
4. Methodology

4.1 Research Method

A mixed-method approach has been followed throughout this study. Both quantitative and qualitative data have been analyzed by using appropriate data analysis method to make this research original and purposeful.

4.2 Sample and Sampling Technique

Eight government primary schools were selected from Dhaka city to observe the classroom activities during ELL. Purposive sampling technique has been followed to find out the samples considering the distance of the schools. Only Grade-V English classrooms have been taken into consideration for this research. Eight teachers have been chosen from the selected schools (1 teacher from 1 school) considering their training from *English in Action* on English Language Learning. The purposive way of sampling has been charted here to find out the trained teacher who is really performing different activities during ELL in the classroom environment. There were 12 students from every school (Grade-V) selected through stratified random sampling approach for maintaining the two groups from each school (low achiever students and high achiever students). Latest academic year’s result in English subject has been considered to find out the two different groups. Forty eight high achiever students from 8 schools have been selected (those who achieved 75+ marks in English subject during their grade 4 final examinations). Rest of the students (low achievers) were selected considering their marks (33-50) during Grade-IV final examination in English subject. There were 96 students who participated in two different FGDs for this study.
4.3 Data Collection Tools

There are three types of tools that have been used to collect data from sample group for this research. Observation checklist has been used to collect data from classroom settings. To get data from teacher participants, a semi-structured questionnaire has been employed and FGDs have been administered in every school for gathering data from students. There were two different types of FGD and questionnaires for two different groups of students.

4.4 Data Analysis Process

Theme wise description process has been used to analyze the qualitative data. There were five main themes (motivation, self-confidence, classroom participation, teacher-student relationship and effective learning) that have been considered to explore teachers’ perceptions about students’ learning during ELL activities in the class. Also, simple statistical analysis such as frequency, chart, and graph has been used to show the quantitative data of the study.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 The Techniques of Reinforcing the Students

All the teachers (8 out of 8) strongly supported and used appreciation (i.e. good, very good etc.) which was one of the types of positive reinforcement. It was found in the classroom observation that most of the teachers were using harsh sentences (e.g. “You will never be able to do anything”, “keep silent”, “read again” etc.) to reinforce their students which are related to negative reinforcement.

Some of the high achiever students stated that “sometimes teacher uses harsh sentences especially when we could not
prepare lesson and also to rectify our fault”. Some of the low achiever students stated that “teachers use harsh sentences most of the time for the desirable change of behaviour and to prepare our lesson appropriately”. Thus, teachers used both positive and negative types of reinforcement, which may depend on students’ activities and teacher’s intension of using different motivational words to make desirable changes in student’s behaviour.

5.2 Positive Reinforcement

All the teachers supported appreciation as positive reinforcement and all of them were using motivational words for increasing the learning opportunities of the students.

5.2.1 Reason for Providing Positive Reinforcement to Students: Teachers provided positive reinforcement for students’ good behaviour, for maintaining rules and discipline in the classroom and school, and for nice and correct class and homework. However, according to classroom observation and students’ FGD, most of the teachers (6 out of 8) provided positive reinforcement for preparing the lesson and other matter got less priority.

5.3 Negative Reinforcement

Some of the teachers (4 out of 8) supported harsh sentences as negative reinforcement. Remaining of them (4 out of 8) supported and used mild punishment and provided the chance for correction as negative reinforcement. 50% teachers (4 out of 8) supported and used harsh sentences and used punishment as negative reinforcement. It was found in the classroom observation that almost all of the teachers (7 out of 8) used harsh sentences and mild punishment (i.e. stand up with holding ear) to make necessary change on students’ unexpected behaviour (i.e. incorrect answering of the question, gossiping with friends etc.). It is a matter of great concern that almost all
the teachers used negative reinforcement during their classroom activities in terms of mild punishment, punishment and used harsh sentences which can have a negative impact on the mind of students.

5.3.1 Reason for Providing Negative Reinforcement to Students: Almost all the teachers (7 out of 8) provided negative reinforcement in the classroom for students’ misconduct, indiscipline in the classroom and school, and incorrect class work and home task.
5.4 Interval of Providing Reinforcement

Most of the teachers (6 out of 8) stated that sometimes they provide positive reinforcement to students for good activities and negative reinforcement for bad activities. Moreover, it was found in the classroom observation and students’ FGD that almost every time most of the teachers (7 out of 8) provided negative reinforcement (i.e. harsh sentences for bad activities and appreciation or claps for good activities). Teachers think that they do not get adequate time for giving reinforcement appropriately in the classroom. Sometimes it is quite impossible to give reinforcement for every good or bad activity. As good activities are desired, they give less importance on giving positive reinforcement for it. In terms of bad activities, it is necessary to rectify behavior; therefore, they give importance on providing negative reinforcement to turn depraved activities into correct and desired. The following graph shows that 6 teachers use reinforcement sometimes and only 2 out of 8 teachers use reinforcement on a regular basis.
5.5 Influence of Reinforcement

5.5.1 Motivation: All the teachers (8 out of 8) mentioned that positive reinforcement helps to make students motivated in their activities. Half of the teachers (4 out of 8) mentioned that negative reinforcement decreases student motivation and rest of the teachers (4 out of 8) mentioned that negative reinforcement helps to make students demotivated in their activities. It was found in the classroom observation that when teacher gives positive reinforcement to students for one of the class work, they become motivated to complete another work fast and appropriately. On the contrary, when the teacher gives negative reinforcement they look very upset and try to take more time to complete that task. Most of the students (90 out of 96) mentioned that when they get an appreciation for any task they try to do better in the next work. High achiever students mentioned that when they listen to harsh sentences for the correction of any work they feel less motivated to do the work. Some of the low achiever students (20 out of 48) mentioned that in the same situation they lost their interest to do the work and sometimes they ignore the task.
5.5.2 Self-Confidence: All the participants of the research (teachers: 8 out of 8 and students: 96 out of 96) mentioned that positive reinforcement increases students’ self-confidence and most of the teachers (6 out of 8) mentioned that negative reinforcement decreases students’ self-confidence. Students stated: “When teachers use harsh sentences (negative reinforcement) we feel shy and do not participate in academic activities.”

5.5.3 Classroom Participation: Most of the teachers (6 out of 8) mentioned that positive reinforcement encourages students to participate while negative reinforcement discourages students to participate in classroom activities. A few teachers (2 out of 8) mentioned that both negative and positive reinforcement encourage students for classroom participation. Classroom observation discloses that when the teacher appreciates for any good activities students participate in the classroom activities joyfully; when the teacher gives negative reinforcement for any faults, their participation rate decrease at that time. When the teacher tries to correct them by using harsh sentences, it decreases students’ classroom participation.
5.5.4 Teacher-Student Relationship: Most of the teachers (6 out of 8) mentioned that positive reinforcement helps to improve teacher-student relationship and a few of them (2 out of 8) stated that it is mildly helpful. 50% of the teachers (4 out of 8) stated that negative reinforcement is mildly helpful to improve teacher-student relationship and remaining of them (4 out of 8) stated that it is unhelpful. It was found in the FGD that high achiever students have good relation with the teacher than low achiever students. Students like the teacher who does not punish them. High achiever students got appreciation from the teacher most of the time which improves their relation and enhances their learning too. Low achiever students are afraid of teachers which deteriorate their relation and affect their learning.
5.5.5 Effective Learning: All the teachers (8 out of 8) mentioned that positive reinforcement inspires students more for learning whereas some of the teacher (4 out of 8) mentioned that negative reinforcement mildly inspires students. Some of them stated that it does not inspire students. Hence, both types of reinforcement are effective to inspire students for learning. In FGD, boys and girls have different views about the influence of positive and negative reinforcement in effective learning. Girls stated: “Appreciation (positive reinforcement) makes us more inspired than harsh sentences (negative reinforcement) and if we get appreciation for any lesson, we can learn it easily and learning become perpetual”. On the other hand, boys stated: “harsh sentences make us more serious for learning than appreciation”.
5.5.6 Importance of Reinforcement: Almost all the teachers (7 out of 8) found positive reinforcement very important and some of the teachers (4 out of 8) found negative reinforcement mildly important for the students. Thus, both types of reinforcement are important for students. However, positive reinforcement is more important than negative reinforcement.
6. Conclusion

Although all the teachers believe that negative reinforcement affect the learning of a student, there are teachers who use it without considering the long-term effect. Also, there are some teachers who believe that negative reinforcement has some positive impact. However, this study indicates that students feel uncomfortable when the teacher uses harsh words in front of their classmates. In Bangladesh, English is not a frequently used language. If a student believes that he/she is not good at English, he/she will be demotivated to use it in the classroom. So, it is better to use positive reinforcement because it has no negative side effect. Since reinforcement has both positive and negative effect on students’ learning teachers should be careful in using any kind of reinforcement. Negative reinforcement may be harmful for the students. Positive reinforcement will motivate students and build their self-confidence.

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Appendices

I

Classroom Observation Schedule

| Name of the Observer: | Date: |
|-----------------------|-------|
| School’s Name:        | Class & Section: |
| Teacher’s Name:       | Lesson: |
| Start Time:           | Finish Time: |
| Total Time:           | |
| Total no. of students:| Girls: |
|                       | Boys: |

Notes:

II

(Semi-structured Interview Schedule for Teachers)

Informed Consent Form

[Please read out to the Participant]

Dear Participant,

Hello! This is…………………………………………….; I am conducting a study which focuses on the Influence of Reinforcement in English Language Learning at Primary Level of Education in Bangladesh. You have been selected as an honorable participant for this study. I will be asking you some questions related to the reinforcement and its influences on Grade-V students. It will take about 15-20 minutes. For your kind concern, it will not bring you any direct benefit but the information you provide is valuable and may help the Education sector in future. Your provided information will remain confidential and will not be used for any other purpose. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw yourself at any time during the study. You are also free not to answer any question or questions that you do not like or want to answer.

If you agree to participate, may I begin my work?

| Participant’s Consent |
|-----------------------|
| Agree (Put √ mark)    |   |

100
Disagree (Put √ mark) □

Participant’s Name and Signature
Name and Signature of the Researcher:

**Background Information:**

Name: __________________________ Sex: Female □ Male □

Age: __________________________ Educational Qualifications: __________________________

School’s Name: __________________________ Class: __________________________

Date: __________________________ Time: __________________________ District: __________________________

Division: __________________________

1. What type of reinforcement do you support?
   a. Positive 
   b. Negative

2. What type of reinforcement do you usually use in your classroom?
   a. Positive 
   b. Negative

3. Why kind of positive reinforcement do you support?
   a. Appreciation 
   b. Provide gifts 
   c. others (i.e. ..........................)

4. Why kind of positive reinforcement do you use?
   a. Appreciation 
   b. Provide gifts 
   c. others (i.e. ..........................)

5. Why kind of negative reinforcement do you support?
   a. Harsh sentences 
   b. Mild punishment 
   c. Punishment 
   d. others (i.e. ..........................)

6. Why kind of negative reinforcement do you use?
   a. Harsh sentences 
   b. Mild punishment 
   c. Punishment 
   d. others (i.e. ..........................)

7. Why do you use positive reinforcement?

8. Why do you use Negative reinforcement?
   How frequently do you use positive reinforcement? Why?

9. How frequently do you use negative reinforcement? Why?
10. Influence of Positive Reinforcement: (Put tick √ mark on the relevant answer)

| Area                        | 1          | 2          | 3          |
|-----------------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Student motivation          | Increase   | Neutral    | Decrease   |
| Self confidence             | Increase   | Neutral    | Decrease   |
| Classroom Participation     | Encourage  | Mildly Encourage | Discourage |
| Teacher-Student relationship| Helpful    | Mildly Helpful | Unhelpful  |
| Effective Learning          | Inspire    | Mildly Inspire | Uninspired |

11. Influence of Negative Reinforcement: (Put tick √ mark on the relevant answer)

| Area                        | 1          | 2          | 3          |
|-----------------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Student motivation          | Increase   | Neutral    | Decrease   |
| Self confidence             | Increase   | Neutral    | Decrease   |
| Classroom Participation     | Encourage  | Mildly Encourage | Discourage |
| Teacher-Student relationship| Helpful    | Mildly Helpful | Unhelpful  |
| Effective Learning          | Inspire    | Mildly Inspire | Uninspired |

12. What types of reinforcement is helpful for your classroom?
   a. Positive  
   b. Negative

   Why?
   Thanks for your kind Co-operation
(Focus group discussion for students)

| School’s Name |
|---------------|
| Class: | Section: |
| Number of Participants: |
| Male- | Female- | Total- |
| Name of the Researcher: |

**Notes:** There are two types of student’s participant group- high achiever and low achiever. According to the classroom observation, the researcher will identify the reinforcement types that have been applied to the two different groups. The focus of the discussion will be selected based on reinforcement that applied by the teacher between two different groups.

The major focus points of the discussion are:
1. How frequently teacher uses reinforcement?
2. Why and when teacher uses those reinforcement?
3. Interval of providing reinforcement
4. Effect of both positive and negative reinforcement on -
   • Student motivation
   • Self confidence
   • Classroom Participation
   • Teacher-Student relationship
   • Effective Learning
5. Importance of reinforcement.

**Question for the Students**-
1. Does your teacher appreciate you / provide gifts for your good work?
2. Does your teacher punish you or use harsh sentences for any of your fault in the classroom?
3. How frequently does your teacher use appreciation or harsh sentences/ mild punishment during the classroom activities?
4. Is there any interval between using appreciation/ provide gifts or harsh sentences/ mild punishment and how long?
5. Why teachers use appreciation/provide gifts or harsh sentences/mild punishment and when?

6. When teachers appreciate you or provide gifts, is there any effect of that on your-
   ● Motivation
   ● Self-confidence
   ● Classroom Participation
   ● Teacher-Student Relationship
   ● Effective Learning
   Please give example………………

7. When teacher mildly punished you or use harsh sentences, is there any effect of that on your-
   ● Motivation
   ● Self-confidence
   ● Classroom Participation
   ● Teacher-Student Relationship
   ● Effective Learning
   Please give example……………………

8. Is there any importance of these reinforcement in your life? If yes, please describe.

List of Students…………………………
Name………………………........... Roll no:
1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.

Thank you very much for your nice cooperation and kind participation.