

Teachers' Perceptions and Strategies of Positive Reinforcement in Malaysian Primary Schools: A Phenomenological Study

Niranjanah A/P Maniarasu^{1*}, Syeda Rabia Tahir²

Faculty of Education and Humanities, UNITAR International University, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia

***Corresponding author:**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.102400034>

Received: 20 August 2026; Accepted: 25 August 2026; Published: 26 September 2026

ABSTRACT

Positive reinforcement is widely promoted as an effective classroom management approach, yet little is known about how Malaysian primary school teachers actually perceive and apply it in their daily practice. This study explored teachers' perceptions of positive reinforcement and the strategies they use to deliver it in primary classrooms. A qualitative, descriptive (Husserlian) phenomenological design was adopted, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with five primary school teachers from Selangor, Johor, Perak, Penang, and Kuala Lumpur, selected through purposive sampling. The interview data were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that teachers hold strongly positive perceptions of positive reinforcement, viewing it as an effective means of encouraging good behaviour, building student confidence, and creating a supportive and engaging learning environment. Teachers reported actively using a wide repertoire of reinforcement strategies, including verbal praise, tangible rewards such as stickers, stars, and points, non-verbal gestures such as smiling and clapping, group-based rewards, extra playtime, and the assignment of responsibilities such as class leadership roles. Positive reinforcement was also perceived to improve student behaviour, classroom participation, and emotional responses, with students described as happier, prouder, more confident, and more cooperative when their efforts were recognised. Teachers' accounts were not uniformly celebratory: they also stressed that reinforcement must be used properly and in moderation, expressing concern that over-frequent tangible rewards can foster dependence and weaken students' own motivation. As lived experience, reinforcement emerged less as a technique these teachers applied than as a relational habit through which they read, encouraged, and sustained their students day to day. The study concludes that, for these participants, positive reinforcement was understood as more than a behaviour management tool; they regarded it as a way of supporting students' emotional development and engagement. The findings imply that teachers should combine multiple reinforcement strategies and balance extrinsic rewards with the cultivation of intrinsic motivation, and, while the small sample means the findings cannot be generalised to Malaysian primary teachers as a whole, they offer transferable insights for teacher training and classroom management practice.

Keywords: Positive reinforcement, teachers' perceptions, reinforcement strategies, classroom management, primary education

INTRODUCTION

Primary school teachers do far more than deliver subject content; they are also responsible for managing classroom behaviour and establishing a productive learning environment in which students feel a sense of belonging and are eager to learn (Johler et al., 2022). Positive reinforcement is recognised as one of the most commonly used approaches in effective classroom management. It emphasises providing rewards, praise, and recognition to students when they display good behaviour, including simple actions such as saying "well done", giving stickers, and appreciating good performers in front of the class (Khanum et al., 2025; Maisarah, 2024). Such practices help students feel valued and encourage the repetition of good behaviour, which over time can improve discipline and create a more supportive classroom climate.

Education systems around the world, including Malaysia, have increasingly emphasised student-centred learning and positive behavioural approaches rather than strict punishment (Lim Kok Seng, 2024; Mat & Jamaludin, 2024). Evidence suggests that reinforcement techniques can substantially improve engagement; for example, Dorji (2025) reported that active classroom participation increased from 42% to 78% following a reinforcement intervention. However, the application of positive reinforcement varies with teachers' understanding, beliefs, and teaching experience (Sarkar, 2025; Adam Ismail, 2023). Some teachers use it regularly without a solid grasp of how to implement it successfully, while others confuse it with simple praise or reward-giving (Zahroh et al., 2025; Gabion et al., 2025). Malaysian primary classrooms are also diverse, with students of differing needs, attitudes, and abilities, which makes classroom management more challenging. Despite the extensive literature on the benefits of positive reinforcement (Raof & Aziz, 2025; Zahid & Cheema, 2023; Abdulrazak et al., 2025), limited research has focused on teachers' perceptions and practical uses of positive reinforcement in actual Malaysian primary classrooms. This creates a gap between educational theory and classroom practice. Accordingly, this study addresses two objectives: (1) to examine teachers' perceptions towards the use of positive reinforcement in the classroom, and (2) to identify the strategies used by teachers to apply positive reinforcement in their teaching. The corresponding research questions are: How do teachers perceive the use of positive reinforcement in the classroom? and What strategies do teachers use to apply positive reinforcement in their teaching?

Problem Statement

Although positive reinforcement is widely endorsed in Malaysian policy discourse, the empirical base within Malaysia remains thin and largely indirect. Malaysian studies have examined student-centred practice in broad terms (Mat & Jamaludin, 2024; Lim Kok Seng, 2024), reinforcement in online rather than face-to-face settings (Raof & Aziz, 2025), inclusive classroom management in an international school context (Mutaqin et al., 2024), and the difficulties facing teachers of learners with special educational needs (Rusli, 2024). Work situated in mainstream Malaysian primary classrooms and focused specifically on how teachers themselves understand and enact reinforcement is scarce. Related Malaysian evidence confirms that primary teachers' perceptions strongly determine whether a classroom strategy is adopted at all (Baharudin et al., 2025), and that varied, interactive strategies raise young Malaysian learners' confidence and participation (Nair et al., 2025) — yet neither study addresses reinforcement directly. The problem this study addresses is therefore that reinforcement is prescribed to Malaysian primary teachers in the absence of evidence describing how those teachers interpret it, which strategies they actually deploy, and what constrains their use of it in real classrooms. Without that account, teacher training and classroom-management guidance rest on assumptions about practice rather than on descriptions of it.

The primary phase is a particularly important site for this inquiry. Behavioural habits, attitudes towards school, and academic self-concept are still forming between the ages of seven and twelve, so the consequences teachers attach to behaviour at this stage carry disproportionate developmental weight (Fatima et al., 2023). Young learners are also more responsive to immediate, concrete recognition than older students, which makes reinforcement both more powerful and more easily misapplied at this level (Maisarah, 2024). Malaysian primary teachers, moreover, generally remain with the same class for a full academic year and teach large, mixed-ability groups, giving them sustained responsibility for classroom climate in a way that subject-rotating secondary teachers do not. Secondary and tertiary settings, where peer influence and intrinsic academic motivation play a larger part, therefore raise different questions from those examined here.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundation

This study is grounded in B. F. Skinner's Operant Conditioning theory, which proposes that behaviour is determined by its consequences: actions followed by positive results tend to be repeated more regularly than those followed by negative outcomes (Leeder, 2022). Operant conditioning is highly applicable to classroom learning because it explains how teachers can modify student behaviour using reinforcement techniques

(Chen, 2023). Positive reinforcement, a core principle of the theory, occurs when a rewarding stimulus is introduced after a desired behaviour is displayed (Killeen, 2023). Timing and consistency are essential; reinforcement strengthens the relationship between behaviour and consequence, whereas inconsistent reinforcement can confuse students and weaken behavioural strategies (Bonghawan & Macalisang, 2024). Related reinforcement theory further distinguishes continuous reinforcement, in which behaviour is rewarded every time it occurs, from intermittent reinforcement, in which rewards are delivered at intervals to sustain behaviour over the long run (Pan et al., 2024; Shinde, 2025).

Operant principles alone, however, cannot explain why reinforcement sometimes strengthens and sometimes erodes a student's willingness to act. Contemporary motivational theory is therefore drawn on here to complement Skinner's account. Self-determination theory holds that behaviour is sustained when it satisfies the needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, and it distinguishes informational feedback, which affirms competence and can support intrinsic motivation, from controlling rewards, which are experienced as pressure and can undermine it — the mechanism behind the over-justification effect observed in reward-saturated classrooms (Xiao & Hew, 2024; Herawati et al., 2024). Bandura's construct of self-efficacy adds that recognition of genuine effort operates as a mastery and social-persuasion cue, raising a student's belief in their own capability and, through that belief, their persistence and willingness to attempt difficult tasks (Bonghawan & Macalisang, 2024).

Read together, these perspectives suggest that positive reinforcement works on two levels simultaneously. At the behavioural level, consequences shape the frequency of observable conduct; at the psychological level, the meaning a student attaches to being recognised shapes confidence, self-regulation, and emotional engagement. Reinforcement that is specific, effort-focused, and informational is thus theorised to support both levels at once, whereas reinforcement that is frequent, tangible, and experienced as controlling may secure short-term compliance at the cost of longer-term autonomous motivation. This dual framing informs the interpretation of teachers' accounts in the discussion that follows.

Positive Reinforcement in Education

In schools, positive reinforcement may take many forms, including oral praise, stickers, tokens, and privileges (Mendoza, 2025). A teacher may compliment a child who has performed a task correctly or reward a group of children who behave well, making the behaviour likely to recur (Bolat, 2023). Positive reinforcement is particularly suited to young learners, who respond strongly to instant feedback and recognition; it builds self-confidence, enhances participation, and strengthens the teacher–student relationship (Maisarah, 2024). Its effectiveness, however, depends on consistency, appropriateness, and timing (Weinsztok et al., 2023). In Malaysian primary schools, teachers typically combine reinforcement strategies to manage diverse classrooms and support inclusive learning (Mutaqin et al., 2024).

Reinforcement is not uniformly beneficial, and several conditions can render it ineffective or actively counterproductive. Where tangible rewards are frequent, expected, and contingent on mere participation, they can displace intrinsic interest, so that students work for the token rather than the task and disengage once the reward is withdrawn (Xiao & Hew, 2024; Dunne, 2025). Praise can also misfire when it is generic, exaggerated, or directed at ability rather than effort: it may signal low expectations to the student receiving it, or invite comparison and resentment among peers where recognition is perceived as unfairly distributed (Bolat, 2023; Bibi et al., 2023). Reinforcement delivered inconsistently, or long after the behaviour it is intended to strengthen, weakens the behaviour–consequence link and leaves students uncertain about what is expected (Bonghawan & Macalisang, 2024; Weinsztok et al., 2023). Individual and developmental differences matter too: students who do not value the reinforcer on offer, or who find public recognition uncomfortable, may respond with withdrawal rather than engagement (Bibi et al., 2023). Effectiveness therefore depends less on whether reinforcement is used than on whether it is specific, timely, proportionate, and matched to the individual learner.

Teachers' Perceptions of Positive Reinforcement

Teachers' perceptions play a critical role in determining the success of reinforcement in the classroom, encompassing their beliefs, attitudes, and understanding of reinforcement strategies (Hassan et al., 2024). Many teachers view positive reinforcement as a viable classroom management tool and believe that verbal praise, rewards, and recognition encourage students to participate in learning activities (Bonna, 2023). Teachers who hold positive beliefs about reinforcement tend to incorporate it into their instruction on a regular basis (Susetyarini et al., 2024). Nevertheless, perceptions are not uniformly positive: some teachers worry about over-dependence on tangible rewards, arguing that incentives may reduce intrinsic motivation (Herawati et al., 2024), and others note that not all students respond equally well because of individual differences in learning patterns (Bibi et al., 2023). Contextual factors such as large classes, limited time, and diverse student needs also shape how Malaysian teachers perceive and use reinforcement (Rusli, 2024).

Malaysian cultural and educational values further mediate how reinforcement is understood and delivered. Malaysian classrooms are shaped by a comparatively high-power-distance and collectivist orientation in which the teacher is positioned as an authority figure and group harmony is valued over individual assertion; recognition that singles out one student can therefore sit uneasily with teachers who wish to avoid embarrassing others, and group-directed reinforcement is often preferred as more culturally comfortable (Mutaqin et al., 2024; Mat & Jamaludin, 2024). The moral and religious dimensions of the national curriculum frame appreciation and encouragement as expressions of care and good character rather than as behavioural technique, which may lead Malaysian teachers to describe reinforcement in relational and moral language rather than in the vocabulary of behaviour modification. The examination-oriented culture of Malaysian schooling pulls in a different direction, directing recognition towards academic attainment so that effort, improvement, and conduct may attract less reinforcement than results (Lim Kok Seng, 2024). Malaysia's multi-ethnic and multilingual classrooms add a further layer, since what counts as an appropriate or valued reward is not uniform across communities, and teachers accordingly report adapting reinforcement to the expectations of the students and families they serve (Rusli, 2024).

Strategies for Implementing Positive Reinforcement

Effective implementation requires planning, consistency, and applications matched to students' developmental needs (Khanum et al., 2025). Strategies in primary schools must be simple, immediate, and meaningful for young learners (Fatima et al., 2023). Verbal praise is among the most popular techniques, with specific praise more effective than general comments. Tangible rewards such as stickers, stars, and tokens are also widely used, and token economy systems allow students to accumulate points that can later be redeemed (Tan et al., 2022), although educators are cautioned against over-frequent rewards (Dunne, 2025). Non-verbal reinforcement, such as smiles, thumbs-up signs, and nods, is subtle yet effective for keeping lessons flowing, especially in large classes (Khuman, 2024). Teachers also reinforce through privileges such as extra playtime or leadership roles, which encourage responsibility, confidence, and longer-term intrinsic drive (McFarland et al., 2026; Leek et al., 2026). Differentiated reinforcement, in which teachers adjust rewards to individual student preferences, and immediate rather than delayed reinforcement further increase effectiveness (Goyibova et al., 2025; Acuff et al., 2023).

Implementation is nonetheless constrained in practice, and the literature identifies several recurrent barriers. Large class sizes make it difficult to notice and respond to individual behaviour, so reinforcement tends to become general rather than specific and some students are systematically overlooked (Rusli, 2024; Khuman, 2024). Teacher workload compounds this: administrative duties, co-curricular responsibilities, and record-keeping leave limited attention for the consistent tracking that token systems require (Johler et al., 2022). Time constraints within a crowded, examination-driven syllabus discourage teachers from pausing instruction to acknowledge behaviour, particularly where reinforcement is perceived as competing with content coverage (Leek et al., 2026; Lim Kok Seng, 2024). Resource limitations restrict access to stickers, charts, and small rewards, which teachers frequently fund themselves (Aleman, 2024).

Teachers report a number of adaptations in response. Verbal and non-verbal reinforcement is relied on more heavily because it costs nothing and interrupts no lesson (Khuman, 2024; Edulan et al., 2025); recognition is shifted from individual to group and peer-mediated forms so that it remains manageable at scale (Mutaqin et al., 2024); reinforcement is embedded within existing routines such as transitions and lesson openings rather than treated as an additional task (Edulan et al., 2025); token systems are simplified so that they can be sustained without detailed record-keeping (Tan et al., 2022); and privileges and responsibilities such as leadership roles are substituted for material rewards, carrying no cost while conveying trust (Joshi et al., 2024). These adaptations suggest that the practical question is less which strategies are ideal than which remain viable under real classroom conditions.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A qualitative research approach based on descriptive (Husserlian) phenomenology was used to investigate teachers' perceptions of positive reinforcement in Malaysian primary schools. The qualitative design was deemed most appropriate because the study aimed to comprehend subjective experiences, beliefs, and interpretations rather than to quantify variables (Lim, 2025). The phenomenological approach was justified because the research concerns teachers' lived, day-to-day interactions with students, their decision-making, and their own interpretations of reinforcement strategies, which are multifaceted and situational and cannot be sufficiently measured using structured quantitative tools (Adeniran & Tayo-Ladega, 2024). The descriptive rather than interpretive tradition was chosen because the objective was to characterise the essential features of reinforcement as teachers themselves experience and describe it, not to advance a hermeneutic reading of meanings they did not articulate. Accordingly, the researcher practised bracketing, setting aside prior assumptions about the value of reinforcement so that the participants' own descriptions governed the analysis, and stayed close to participants' language when generating codes and themes.

Participants and Sampling

The participants were five primary school teachers currently working in government schools in Peninsular Malaysia, located in Selangor, Johor, Perak, Penang, and Kuala Lumpur. Purposive sampling was employed, which is most suitable when the goal is to obtain information-rich data from participants with specific knowledge and experience (Obilor, 2023; Khumalo & Makondo, 2023). The inclusion criteria required that participants (1) were currently teaching in Malaysian primary schools, (2) had at least one year of teaching experience, and (3) had practised classroom management techniques such as positive reinforcement. The small sample is consistent with qualitative research, in which depth is prioritised over breadth and data saturation can be reached with small, information-rich samples (Ahmed, 2025). Phenomenological studies conventionally involve between three and ten participants so that each account can be examined at length, and the sample was deliberately kept small for that reason. It is acknowledged, however, that five teachers drawn from five states cannot represent the diversity of Malaysian primary schooling in terms of school size, urban and rural setting, ethnic composition, or resourcing. The study therefore makes no claim to statistical generalisation; its findings are offered as an in-depth account of these participants' lived experience, from which readers may judge transferability to comparable settings.

Instrument and Data Collection

A semi-structured interview guide was developed on the basis of the research objectives and the literature review. The guide covered what positive reinforcement implies in the classroom, teachers' feelings about its use with primary school children, the strategies they use, students' reactions, perceived problems, and suggestions for improvement. Semi-structured interviews offer flexibility and structure simultaneously and are effective for investigating complex, subjective phenomena while permitting probing and clarification (Belina, 2023; Karatsareas, 2022; Shoozan & Mohamad, 2024). The instrument, designated the Teachers' Perceptions of Positive Reinforcement Interview Protocol (TPPR-IP), comprised [NUMBER] open-ended questions arranged in [NUMBER] sections corresponding to the two research questions, together with

standard probes; the full protocol is reproduced in Appendix A. Content validity was established through review by [NUMBER] experts in educational psychology and primary classroom management, whose comments were used to reword ambiguous items and remove redundancy. The refined protocol was then pilot tested with [NUMBER] primary school teachers who did not take part in the main study, in order to check question clarity, sequencing, and interview length; [no substantive revisions were required / the wording of questions X and Y was adjusted]. Because qualitative interviewing does not rest on statistical reliability, dependability was pursued instead through consistent application of the protocol across all five interviews, verbatim transcription, and retention of the recordings and transcripts. After formal permission and informed consent were obtained, interviews of approximately 30 to 45 minutes were conducted at times convenient to the participants, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were assured.

Data Analysis

The transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, a well-accepted approach for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns in qualitative data (Naeem et al., 2023). Analysis proceeded through familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, and interpretation and reporting (Robinson & Wilson, 2022; Polat, 2025). Overlapping or ambiguous themes were revised to enhance analytical accuracy and clarity. Coding proceeded inductively and stayed close to participants' wording. For example, T1's statement that praise makes students "feel happy and valued" was initially coded as emotional affirmation, T3's practice of assigning "responsibilities like class leader" as trust-based recognition, and T2's insistence that reinforcement "must be used properly" as conditional endorsement; the first two were subsequently clustered under the themes of positive perceptions and recognition-focused strategies, while the third was retained as a qualifying account within Theme 1.

Several procedures were used to strengthen trustworthiness. Transcripts, together with a summary of the interpretation drawn from each interview, were returned to participants for member checking, and all five confirmed that the account reflected their intended meaning. A second coder independently coded [NUMBER] of the five transcripts; coding discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached, and [agreement was reached on all codes / an inter-coder agreement of X% was obtained before discussion]. Peer debriefing was conducted with [a colleague experienced in qualitative research], who interrogated the theme structure and the fit between codes and data. An audit trail comprising the recordings, verbatim transcripts, the initial coding framework, theme-development memos, and analytic notes was maintained throughout so that the analytic pathway can be traced.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic information of the five participants, who are identified as T1 to T5. The participants comprised three female and two male teachers aged 29 to 41, with between 5 and 15 years of teaching experience, all serving in government primary schools across Peninsular Malaysia.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Information of Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Teaching experience	School type	Location
T1	Female	29	5 years	Government	Selangor
T2	Male	35	10 years	Government	Johor
T3	Female	41	15 years	Government	Perak
T4	Female	32	8 years	Government	Penang
T5	Male	38	12 years	Government	Kuala Lumpur

Thematic analysis of the interviews produced four themes relevant to teachers' perceptions and strategies, summarised in Table 2 and elaborated below.

Table 2. Themes and Codes From The Thematic Analysis

Theme	Codes
Theme 1: Teachers demonstrate positive perceptions towards the use of positive reinforcement in the classroom	Reinforcement; student confidence; increases motivation; creates positive learning environment
Theme 2: Teachers actively utilise a variety of positive reinforcement strategies in their classroom practices	Verbal praise; use of rewards; encouragement during activities; public recognition of students
Theme 3: Positive reinforcement leads to improved student behaviour, engagement, and emotional responses	Students feel happy; increased participation; improved behaviour; higher engagement in learning
Theme 4: Teachers adopt different classroom techniques to deliver positive reinforcement effectively	Token reward system; non-verbal gestures; assigning responsibilities; group-based rewards

Theme 1: Positive Perceptions of Positive Reinforcement

All the interviewed teachers expressed a positive attitude towards positive reinforcement as both a behaviour management strategy and a means of enhancing the overall learning environment. Their perceptions were primarily shaped by previous experiences of how students responded to praise and encouragement. T1 explained that positive reinforcement “encourages them to do better” and makes students “feel happy and valued”, while T2 described it as “rewarding good behaviour so students repeat it again”. Teachers also strongly believed that reinforcement builds confidence and motivation; T1 noted that young learners enjoy appreciation, which increases their confidence and willingness to participate in class activities. Beyond behaviour, teachers regarded reinforcement as instrumental in developing positive, engaged classrooms, with T5 emphasising that the approach is “necessary for primary school teaching” because it supports classroom management and student involvement. At the same time, some teachers were cautious: T2 stressed that reinforcement “must be used properly” to achieve its benefits, showing awareness that improper use can reduce its effectiveness.

Theme 2: Variety of Reinforcement Strategies in Daily Practice

Teachers did not rely on a single method but applied several reinforcement strategies to manage classroom behaviour and improve student interest. Verbal praise was the most widely applied: T1 said, “I usually praise them or say ‘good job’ so they feel happy”, and T3 reported using “praise, smile” and compliments. Tangible rewards were also common, with T1 mentioning “stickers, and sometimes small rewards”, T2 describing “points, stars, and sometimes allowing students extra play time”, and T4 using “stickers, praise, and sometimes small gifts”. Encouragement during activities was another prominent strategy; T1 claps for students when they answer correctly, and T5 uses reinforcement to motivate group behaviour, indicating that reinforcement is applied throughout the learning process rather than only at its end. Recognition-focused approaches were also evident, with T3 assigning “responsibilities like class leader” as a form of trust-based reinforcement. These findings align with literature showing that verbal praise provides immediate feedback (Kardiyanto et al., 2025) and that token-based systems help sustain motivation among young learners (Xiao & Hew, 2024).

Theme 3: Improved Behaviour, Engagement, and Emotional Responses

All teachers indicated that when positive reinforcement is applied, students demonstrate more appropriate behaviour, higher participation, and more positive emotional responses. T1 reported a noticeable increase in appropriate behaviour following regular reinforcement, and T2 observed that reinforcement improves “both behaviour and participation of students”. Engagement also increased: T5 found that students “become more

cooperative and engaged” after receiving encouragement, and T1 noted that even usually quiet students began to participate more. Emotionally, T3 observed that students “feel proud and respected” when their efforts are recognised, while T4 reported that students “feel happy and try to follow rules”. Teachers further explained that regular appreciation builds students' belief in their own abilities, which is crucial in primary settings where social skills and self-esteem are still developing. These accounts are consistent with prior findings that reinforcement enhances participation and emotional wellbeing (Dorji, 2025; Fitriyati et al., 2022).

Theme 4: Techniques for Delivering Reinforcement Effectively

Teachers adapted their delivery techniques to the classroom context and to individual students. Alongside verbal reinforcement, they employed non-verbal cues such as clapping, smiling, and positive gestures, which encourage participation without interrupting the flow of a lesson (Edulan et al., 2025; Afdaliah, 2022). Structured reward systems, including stickers, points, stars, and extra playtime, were used to recognise good behaviour, echoing evidence that rewards positively influence learning motivation in elementary schools (Margolang et al., 2019; Aleman, 2024). Group-based reinforcement was used to promote teamwork, with T5 noting that group rewards make students “more cooperative”. Finally, assigning responsibilities such as class leadership to well-behaved students helped them feel trusted and respected, improving confidence and nurturing leadership abilities (Joshi et al., 2024; Mamuaya, 2025). The flexibility and creativity evident in these techniques suggest that successful classroom management in primary schools depends on combining multiple forms of reinforcement (Hardin & Hardin, 2024).

Divergent Accounts and Reflexive Considerations

Although the four themes were strongly affirmative overall, the accounts were not without qualification, and those qualifications are reported here rather than smoothed over. T2's insistence that reinforcement “must be used properly” carried an implicit warning that careless or excessive use is counterproductive, and teachers generally framed reinforcement as a matter of judgement — deciding who to recognise, for what, and how often — rather than as automatically beneficial. [AUTHOR: insert here any further instances in the transcripts in which a participant reported reinforcement failing, losing its effect, being applied unevenly, or being constrained by class size, workload, time, or resources, with verbatim quotations.] It should also be acknowledged that participants were teachers describing a practice endorsed by policy and professional norms, to a researcher known to be studying it. Social desirability may therefore have encouraged emphasis on successes and reticence about difficulties, and the predominance of affirmative accounts should be read with that in mind: the near-absence of critical accounts is as much a feature of the data-collection context as a finding about reinforcement itself.

DISCUSSION

The study discovered that Malaysian primary school teachers hold strong, favourable beliefs about positive reinforcement, viewing it as an effective classroom management strategy that enhances behaviour, motivation, and the classroom environment. This is consistent with earlier research in which teachers regarded reinforcement as a viable management tool (Bonna, 2023; Hassan et al., 2024) and confirms the operant conditioning principle that positive consequences shape behaviour (Leeder, 2022; Chen, 2023). Positive teacher perceptions therefore appear to be an important facilitating factor for the effective execution of reinforcement strategies. Similar patterns have been reported among Malaysian primary school teachers, whose favourable perceptions of a classroom strategy strongly shape their willingness to adopt it in practice (Baharudin et al., 2025).

Regarding practice, the study discovered that these teachers employed a diverse repertoire of strategies, including verbal praise, tangible rewards, encouragement, non-verbal gestures, group rewards, and recognition through responsibility. This matches the literature identifying praise and privileges as typical reinforcement techniques in primary classrooms (Mendoza, 2025; Tan et al., 2022; Khanum et al., 2025) and supports the proposition that multiple strategies are more effective than any single technique (Hardin &

Hardin, 2024). In the Malaysian context, teachers modified reinforcement strategies according to varied classroom requirements (Mutaqin et al., 2024), demonstrating both the flexibility and the practicality of reinforcement in teaching. Comparable findings have been reported in Malaysian early-years classrooms, where teachers combined a varied repertoire of interactive strategies that enhanced children's confidence, motivation, and participation (Nair et al., 2025).

The results further revealed that positive reinforcement improves student behaviour, engagement, and emotional reactions, with students described as more confident, active, and motivated. These outcomes strongly support previous studies reporting that reinforcement improves behaviour, motivation, and academic performance (Hasanah et al., 2024; Abdulrazak et al., 2025; Ahmed et al., 2022) and show that reinforcement influences not only behaviour but also emotional and social development. A noteworthy nuance is teachers' awareness that reinforcement must be applied correctly and in moderation, reflecting concerns in the literature that excessive tangible rewards can diminish intrinsic motivation (Herawati et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2023).

Beyond confirming existing findings, the accounts invite a more interpretive reading. What these teachers described was not the contingency management that operant theory anticipates, but something closer to a relational and moral practice. Reinforcement was talked about in the vocabulary of care, trust, and appreciation — students made to “feel happy and valued”, “proud and respected”, or trusted with “responsibilities like class leader” — rather than in the vocabulary of behaviour and consequence. On this reading the operative reinforcer is not the sticker or the point but the recognition it carries, which explains why non-material forms such as clapping, smiling, and the granting of responsibility featured as prominently in these accounts as tangible rewards did.

Two implications follow. First, the dual framing set out earlier is supported from the practitioner side: these teachers attended simultaneously to observable conduct and to the confidence, pride, and belonging that recognition produced, and they judged reinforcement successful when the second was achieved and not merely the first. Second, their insistence on proper and moderate use points to a situated, practical theory of reinforcement that operant models do not capture — an awareness that the same act can affirm competence or become a controlling inducement depending on its specificity, timing, and proportion. This locates teachers' expertise not in knowing the technique but in exercising judgement about it, which has a direct consequence for teacher preparation: training that transmits a repertoire of strategies addresses the easier half of the problem, while the harder half is cultivating the capacity to read when recognition will be experienced as informational rather than controlling. The study is limited by its small, Peninsular Malaysia-based sample and its reliance on teachers' self-reported perceptions, so the findings should be generalised with caution.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how five Malaysian primary school teachers perceive and apply positive reinforcement in their classrooms. Within this small, purposively selected group, teachers demonstrated clearly positive perceptions, understanding reinforcement as a means of encouraging good behaviour, building confidence and motivation, and creating a supportive learning environment, and they actively used a combination of verbal praise, tangible rewards, encouragement, non-verbal gestures, group rewards, and responsibility-based recognition. Positive reinforcement was perceived to improve behaviour, engagement, and emotional responses among students. The study contributes an in-depth, classroom-grounded account of reinforcement as these teachers experienced it. Because that account rests on five self-reported perspectives from five states, it cannot support claims about Malaysian primary schooling generally, and what follows is offered as transferable insight rather than generalisable finding: teachers may wish to combine multiple reinforcement strategies, deliver reinforcement immediately and consistently, and balance extrinsic rewards with the development of intrinsic motivation. Future research should include larger samples across Malaysia, incorporate students' perspectives, and adopt mixed-method or longitudinal designs to determine the lasting effects of positive reinforcement on motivation and performance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank UNITAR International University for supporting this research.

REFERENCES

1. Abdulrazak, S., Mohammed Bello, H., & Abubakar, S. (2025). Effect of positive reinforcement on addressing school avoidance and enhancing academic motivation among junior secondary school students in low-income communities in Niger State, Nigeria. *International Journal of Education Effectiveness Research*, 7(8). <https://doi.org/10.70382/hijeer.v07i8.021>
2. Acuff, S. F., MacKillop, J., & Murphy, J. G. (2023). A contextualized reinforcer pathology approach to addiction. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 2(5), 309–323. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-023-00167-y>
3. Adam Ismail, I. (2023). Using positive reinforcement to increase student engagement in the classroom [Master's thesis, Minnesota State University Moorhead].
4. Adeniran, A. O., & Tayo-Ladega, O. (2024). Critical analysis of phenomenological research design in a qualitative research method. *Management Analytics and Social Insights*, 1(2), 186–196. <https://doi.org/10.22105/ad338t15>
5. Afdaliah, N. (2022). Teachers' gestures in EFL classroom. *Al-Lisan: Jurnal Bahasa*, 7(2), 182–197. <https://doi.org/10.30603/al.v7i2.2735>
6. Ahmed, M. M., Rahman, A., Hossain, M. K., & Tambi, F. B. (2022). Ensuring learner-centred pedagogy in an open and distance learning environment by applying scaffolding and positive reinforcement. *Asian Association of Open Universities Journal*, 17(3), 289–304. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AAOUJ-05-2022-0064>
7. Ahmed, S. K. (2025). Sample size for saturation in qualitative research: Debates, definitions, and strategies. *Journal of Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health*, 5, 100171. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.glmedi.2024.100171>
8. Aleman, J. (2024). The effectiveness of a reward system: Introducing positive reinforcement and analyzing the effects of withdrawal of reinforcer on behavior [Master's thesis, Trinity Christian College].
9. Baharudin, S. N. A., Nair, S. M., Siew, K. H., Amer Nordin, F. B., Mechael, P. D., Mohamad, S. N. H. B., & Perumal, S. (2025). Investigating primary school teachers' perceptions on the effectiveness of TikTok in enhancing speaking skills in the ESL classroom. *Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology*, 9(8), 1438–1451. <https://doi.org/10.55214/2576-8484.v9i8.9641>
10. Belina, A. (2023). Semi-structured interviewing as a tool for understanding informal civil society. *Voluntary Sector Review*, 14(2), 331–347. <https://doi.org/10.1332/204080522X16454629995872>
11. Bibi, S., Mahnaz, W., Akhter, N., Kiani, J. A., & Manzoor, A. (2023). Students' perception about teachers' classroom behavior at secondary level. *Al-Qantara*, 9(3), 242–257.
12. Bolat, Ö. (2023). Developing a scale to measure parents' reward and praise behaviours for parental involvement. *The Universal Academic Research Journal*, 5(3), 270–280. <https://doi.org/10.55236/tuara.1344360>
13. Bonghawan, R. G. G., & Macalisang, D. (2024). Teachers' learning reinforcement: Effects on students' motivation, self-efficacy and academic performance. *International Journal of Scientific Research and Management*, 12(02), 3218–3228. <https://doi.org/10.18535/ijssrm/v12i02.el08>
14. Bonna, K. (2023). Concept and nature of classroom management practices. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies and Innovative Research*, 11(4), 1601–1615. <https://doi.org/10.53075/Ijmsirq/098433453367>
15. Chen, X. (2023). A study of using reward and punishment in the education of school-aged children—based on behaviorism theory operant conditioning. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 10(1), 86–90.
16. Dorji, C. (2025). The power of reinforcement strategies: Evaluating its impact on behavioral change in a Bhutanese classroom. *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies*, 51(6), 478–491.
17. Dunne, G. (2025). Resisting edutainment: How reward deficiency syndrome fuels the student attention crisis. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-025-10022-7>
18. Edulan, J. M. R., Tabenas, I. J. B., & Baluyos, G. R. (2025). Enhancing classroom management through simplifying transitions with clap (cue-based learning prompt). *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Applied Science*, 10(9), 630–644. <https://doi.org/10.51584/ijrias.2025.100900064>
19. Fatima, S., Kirmani, N. S., & Tanweer, L. (2023). Impact of reinforcement strategies on students' learning behaviors in classroom at primary level. *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*, 4(4), 276–283.
20. Fitriyati, F., Hengki, H., & Aprizani, Y. (2022). Junior high school students' interest in English speaking supported by classmates and teacher. *Proceeding: Islamic University of Kalimantan*.

21. Gabion, N., Decatoria, A., Ladia, M., & Huliganga, H. J. (2025). Exploring positive reinforcement as a strategy to reduce challenging behaviors in early childhood classrooms. *Psychology and Education: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 41(3), 402–409. <https://doi.org/10.70838/pemj.410308>
22. Goyibova, N., Muslimov, N., Sabirova, G., Kadirova, N., & Samatova, B. (2025). Differentiation approach in education: Tailoring instruction for diverse learner needs. *MethodsX*, 14, 103163. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mex.2025.103163>
23. Hardin, C., & Hardin, C. J. (2024). Effective classroom management: Models and strategies for today's classrooms. BoD–Books on Demand.
24. Hasanah, M., Arafat, Y., Barni, M., Raya, A. T., & Aprilianto, A. (2024). Teachers' strategies for managing disruptive behavior in the classroom during the learning process. *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 7(3), 628–645. <https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v7i3.7>
25. Hassan, Z. T., Shadrach, A., & Gboyega, O. S. (2024). Effect of behaviour modification strategy (positive reinforcement) in reducing truancy among public senior secondary school students in Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. *Journal of Advanced Education and Sciences*, 4(1), 9–18.
26. Herawati, N., Jafari, M., & Sanders, K. (2024). Teachers' perceptions of the efficacy of positive behavior support systems. *International Journal of Education and Cognitive Sciences*, 5(2), 8–15.
27. Johler, M., Krumsvik, R. J., Bugge, H. E., & Helgevd, N. (2022). Teachers' perceptions of their role and classroom management practices in a technology rich primary school classroom. *Frontiers in Education*, 7, 841385. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.841385>
28. Joshi, P. D., Li, C., & Walker, D. O. (2024). Classroom leadership roles activity: A pathway to sharing leadership with student teams. *Journal of Management Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10525629241264548>
29. Karatsareas, P. (2022). Semi-structured interviews. In *Research methods in language attitudes* (p. 99). Cambridge University Press.
30. Kardiyanto, D. W., Wijanarko, B., & Himawanto, W. (2025). Effect of positive reinforcement on underhand passing skills among secondary school students. *Jurnal SPORTIF: Jurnal Penelitian Pembelajaran*, 11(3), 547–563.
31. Khanum, B., Sardar, R., & Bajwa, T. H. (2025). Role of positive reinforcement strategies in students learning performance at elementary level. *ASSAJ*, 4(01), 2218–2235.
32. Khumalo, D. N., & Makondo, P. V. (2023). Challenges faced by primary school teachers in including learners with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in the mainstream classrooms in the Hhohho Region, Eswatini. *The Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 20–36. <https://doi.org/10.9790/7388-1304042036>
33. Khuman, P. (2024). The impact of non-verbal communication in teaching: Enhancing educational effectiveness. *A Global Journal of Humanities*, 7(89), 89–95.
34. Killeen, P. R. (2023). Theory of reinforcement schedules. *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*, 120(3), 289–319. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jeab.880>
35. Kim, M., Albers, N. D., & Knotts, T. L. (2023). Academic success through engagement and trust fostered by professor leadership style. *Education Sciences*, 13(6), 537. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13060537>
36. Leeder, T. M. (2022). Behaviorism, Skinner, and operant conditioning: Considerations for sport coaching practice. *Strategies*, 35(3), 27–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08924562.2022.2052776>
37. Leek, J., Rojek, M., Dobińska, G., & Kosiorek, M. (2026). Navigating the power of time in classroom practices: Teachers' and students' perspectives. *Educational Review*, 78(1), 80–102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2024.2438878>
38. Lim, W. M. (2025). What is qualitative research? An overview and guidelines. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 33(2), 199–229. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14413582241264619>
39. Lim Kok Seng, E. (2024). Investigating teachers' views of student-centred learning approach. <https://doi.org/10.60692/1f683-kq689>
40. Maisarah, M. (2024). Enhancing children's learning motivation through positive reinforcement: A classroom communication strategy. *Jurnal Smart*, 10(1), 81–95. <https://doi.org/10.52657/js.v10i1.2289>
41. Mamuaya, C. L. (2025). Building better behavior: How school environments shape student character. *International Journal of Scientific Research and Management*, 13(05), 4105–4112. <https://doi.org/10.18535/ijsrcm/v13i05.el05>
42. Margolang, N., Hemita, N., & Antosa, Z. (2019). The correlations between reward and elementary school students' learning motivation. *Journal of Teaching and Learning in Elementary Education*, 2(1), 64–70.
43. Mat, N. C., & Jamaludin, K. A. (2024). Effectiveness of practices and applications of student-centered teaching and learning in primary schools: A systematic literature review. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 13(3), 1025–1044.

44. McFarland, A., Hill, I., Doden, W., & Benassi, C. (2026). The equality of life game: Examining class-based privilege and inequality in workforce entry through experiential learning. *Journal of Management Education*, 50(1), 71–101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10525629251374683>
45. Mendoza, D. (2025). Exploring teachers' lived experiences with classroom reinforcements: A phenomenological study. *PCU Graduate School of Education Research Journal*, 1(1), 97–105.
46. Mutaqin, Z., Riyanto, Y., Sholeh, M., Khamidi, A., & Amalia, K. (2024). Implementation of multi-level inclusive learning management in Indonesian schools of Kinabalu City Malaysia. *Edukasi*, 18(2), 121–135. <https://doi.org/10.15294/edukasi.v18i2.16640>
47. Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K., & Ranfagni, S. (2023). A step-by-step process of thematic analysis to develop a conceptual model in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22, 16094069231205789. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231205789>
48. Nair, S. M., Tahir, S. R., Jopius, A. A., & Govindarajoo, M. V. (2025). The impact of play-based learning in teaching English to preschoolers in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia. *International Journal of Innovative Research and Scientific Studies*, 8(7), 727–737. <https://doi.org/10.53894/ijirss.v8i7.10530>
49. Obilor, E. I. (2023). Convenience and purposive sampling techniques: Are they the same? *International Journal of Innovative Social & Science Education Research*, 11(1), 1–7.
50. Pan, R., Wang, Q., Cao, J., & Zhou, C. (2024). Deep reinforcement learning for solving steelmaking-continuous casting scheduling problems under time-of-use tariffs. *International Journal of Production Research*, 62(1–2), 404–420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207543.2023.2267693>
51. Polat, A. (2025). Thematic analysis in qualitative research: Common pitfalls and practical insights for academic writing. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 24, 16094069251372835.
52. Raof, M. Z., & Aziz, M. N. A. (2025). The usage of positive reinforcement to study its effect on learners' motivation during online class. *Practitioner Research*, 7(1), 73–87. <https://doi.org/10.32890/pr2025.7.1.4>
53. Robinson, O., & Wilson, A. (2022). Transcribing and coding. In *Practicing and presenting social research*. BCcampus.
54. Rusli, A. N. (2024). Issues and challenges faced by Malaysian Montessori school teachers in teaching special educational needs children. I. Imre Sándor Neveléstudományi Konferencia, 37–43.
55. Sarkar, H. (2025). The power of positive reinforcement in classrooms. *International Journal For Multidisciplinary Research*, 7(5). <https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2025.v07i05.58402>
56. Shinde, S. (2025). The role of reinforcement strategies in employee retention: A conceptual analysis based on Skinner theory. *International Journal of Management and Development Studies*, 14(5), 18–24. <https://doi.org/10.53983/ijmnds.v14n5.003>
57. Shoozan, A., & Mohamad, M. (2024). Application of interview protocol refinement framework in systematically developing and refining a semi-structured interview protocol. *SHS Web of Conferences*, 182, 04006.
58. Susetyarini, R. E., Baiduri, B., Darmayanti, R., Nuryami, N., Siregar, Y. S., Sahara, N., & Suprayitno, K. (2024). Learning reform: Why does behavioral theory prevent interactive teaching? *AMCA Journal of Community Development*, 4(1), 43–50. <https://doi.org/10.51773/ajcd.v4i1.117>
59. Tan, K. H., Kasiveloo, M., & Abdullah, I. H. (2022). Token economy for sustainable education in the future: A scoping review. *Sustainability*, 14(2), 716. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14020716>
60. Weinsztok, S. C., Goldman, K. J., & DeLeon, I. G. (2023). Assessing parameters of reinforcement on efficiency of acquisition: A systematic review. *Behavior Analysis in Practice*, 16(1), 76–92. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40617-022-00715-7>
61. Xiao, Y., & Hew, K. F. T. (2024). Intangible rewards versus tangible rewards in gamified online learning: Which promotes student intrinsic motivation, behavioural engagement, cognitive engagement and learning performance? *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 55(1), 297–317. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.13361>
62. Zahid, L., & Cheema, A. U. (2023). An investigation of the impact of positive and negative reinforcement in motivating student's learning. *Pakistan Languages and Humanities Review*, 7(2), 913–923. [https://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2023\(7-II\)81](https://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2023(7-II)81)
63. Zahroh, A. A., Prastiwi, Y., & Hidayat, N. (2025). Positive reinforcement strategies: Boosting students' achievement. *Deleted Journal*, 3(2), 182–190. <https://doi.org/10.61787/11znmm64>