

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF REWARD AND PUNISHMENT STRATEGIES IN ENHANCING ENGLISH VOCABULARY ACQUISITION AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITAS ISLAM KEBANGSAAN INDONESIA

Nelly Mursyidah

Universitas Islam Kebangsaan Indonesia
zaydanalfarizki50@gmail.com

Raiyan

Universitas Islam Kebangsaan Indonesia
raiyansofyan@gmail.com

Yunita Asman

Universitas Islam Kebangsaan Indonesia
yunitaasman11@gmail.com

Syakbi

Universitas Islam Kebangsaan Indonesia
sistersyakbil@gmail.com

Desy Sary Ayunda

Universitas Malikussaleh Aceh, Indonesia
desyayunda@unimal.ac.id

Abstract

Reward and punishment are part of the learning process, both of which are often used as alternatives to motivate learning. This research used a descriptive qualitative approach with research subjects 3 English lecturers and 15 students from three different classes. Data collection was carried out by interviews. The results of the research show that the application of the reward and punishment method to increase students' English vocabulary is very enthusiastic in learning. The reward and punishment method is combined with several games and movements to motivate students to master English vocabulary. Rewards given include scores, praise, applause and handicraft prizes. Meanwhile, punishment repeats what has been learned, doesn't get a score, or doesn't even get a handicraft prize. The advantage of this method is that it fosters a sense of competitiveness and motivates students to learn optimally. Meanwhile, the disadvantage of this method is that it requires more money as a gift, sometimes it becomes a burden for students who are less active and mentally weak, and focuses on active students.

Keyword: *Reward, Punishment, English vocabulary, students*

Abstrak

Reward dan punishment menjadi bagian dari proses pembelajaran, keduanya sering dijadikan sebagai alternatif untuk memotivasi belajar. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan subjek penelitian 3 dosen bahasa Inggris dan 15 mahasiswa dari tiga kelas yang berbeda. Pengumpulan data dilakukan dengan wawancara. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa, penerapan metode reward dan punishment terhadap peningkatan kosakata bahasa Inggris mahasiswa sangat antusias dalam pembelajaran. Metode reward dan punishment yang dikombinasikan dengan beberapa permainan dan gerakan untuk memotivasi mahasiswa untuk menguasai kosakata bahasa Inggris. Reward yang diberikan berupa skor, pujian, tepuk tangan, dan hadiah kerajinan tangan. Sedangkan punishment mengulang yang sudah dipelajari, tidak mendapatkan skor, atau bahkan tidak mendapatkan hadiah kerajinan tangan. Kelebihan dari metode ini adalah menumbuhkan rasa kompetitif, dan memotivasi belajar peserta didik secara maksimal. Sedangkan kekurangan dari metode ini adalah membutuhkan biaya lebih sebagai hadiah, terkadang menjadi beban bagi mahasiswa yang kurang aktif dan mental lemah, dan terfokus pada mahasiswa yang aktif.

Kata Kunci: Reward, Punishment, kosakata bahasa Inggris, mahasiswa

Introduction

Education in Indonesia is conducted both formally and non-formally. An educational institution embodies the functions and objectives of national education as stipulated in the Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 2 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, which states: "National education functions to develop capabilities and shape the character and civilization of a dignified nation in order to educate the life of the nation. It aims to develop the potential of students to become human beings who believe in and are devoted to God Almighty, possess noble character, are healthy, knowledgeable, capable, creative, independent, and become democratic and responsible citizens."

Education is a conscious and planned effort to create a learning environment and learning process in which students actively develop their potential to acquire spiritual strength, religious values, self-awareness, personality, intelligence, noble character, and the skills needed for themselves, society, the nation, and the state. One of the roles and responsibilities of an educator is to guide students, both in the learning process and, more importantly, in character development (Yunus, 2021).

Efforts to improve student academic achievement are closely linked to the role of educators (lecturers), who are at the center of the learning process. Every learning medium, method, and model used by educators significantly influences students' learning outcomes, including cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains.

Learning outcomes refer to behavioral changes gained by students after engaging in learning activities (Rifa'i, 2009). In educational institutions known as learning communities, educators are fully responsible for the behavioral and academic development of their students. The quality of student behavior and academic performance is largely determined by the educator's sincerity in teaching and their ability to manage the classroom environment effectively to ensure a conducive learning atmosphere.

Lecturers must consistently pay attention to students' learning behavior in the classroom, modifying such behavior by providing rewards or punishments as forms of positive and negative reinforcement, and by applying principles of individualized learning even in classical or group-based learning settings.

Reward and punishment serve as educational tools that stimulate students' efforts to improve or enhance their academic performance. A reward is a gift, compensation, or educational tool given to students who have achieved good academic performance. Another perspective on rewards views them as tools for educating children so that they feel pleased when their actions or tasks are appreciated (Purwanto, 2017). Beyond their function as educational tools, both rewards and punishments also serve as motivational instruments for student learning.

With proper learning motivation, students tend to achieve better results. Persistent effort, especially when driven by strong motivation, enables learners to generate meaningful motivation within themselves (Sudirman, 2018). Given the importance of rewards and punishments in the learning process, not only as educational tools but also as sources of motivation, they play a crucial role in helping students (particularly university students) attain the highest possible levels of learning motivation.

Method

This research adopts a descriptive qualitative design with a focus on thematic analysis to explore how reward and punishment strategies are applied in English vocabulary learning and how they impact student motivation and acquisition at Universitas Islam Kebangsaan Indonesia (UNIKI). A qualitative approach was chosen to allow for an in-depth, contextual understanding of the experiences and perceptions of both lecturers and students.

The study employed a purposive sampling method to ensure that participants possessed relevant experience and insight. The sample consisted of three English lecturers and fifteen undergraduate students who are actively enrolled in English language courses. These participants were selected based on their direct involvement with teaching or learning English vocabulary and their familiarity with the use of reward and punishment strategies in the classroom context.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing flexibility to probe deeper into participants' responses while maintaining a consistent structure across interviews. The interview guide was developed around three main themes: (1) types of rewards and punishments implemented, (2) the rationale behind their application, and (3) their perceived effects on student vocabulary acquisition.

The data were analyzed using coding and thematic interpretation. The researcher began with open coding to identify significant statements, followed by axial coding to categorize patterns and connections across the dataset. Themes were then constructed to represent the core findings related to the effectiveness of reward and punishment in vocabulary learning. This thematic analysis allowed the researcher to derive insights grounded in the participants' narratives.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed triangulation of both sources and methods. Data from lecturers and students were compared, and interview findings were cross-validated with field notes and reflective memos written during the data collection process.

This study strictly adhered to ethical research standards. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, and participation was entirely voluntary. The researcher also secured verbal approval from relevant institutional authorities at UNIKI to conduct the study.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The findings of this study reveal a progressive enhancement in English vocabulary acquisition among first-semester university students at Universitas Islam Kebangsaan Indonesia (UNIKI) following the implementation of reward and punishment strategies. These findings are presented chronologically based on observations and reflections from three consecutive classroom sessions.

Initial Improvement Observed Following the Implementation of Reward and Punishment

The initial signs of improvement in vocabulary acquisition were clearly observable following the implementation of the reward and punishment strategy throughout three structured learning sessions. Each session revealed progressive developments in student engagement, language retention, and behavioral responsiveness.

During the first session, the primary focus was on building rapport and understanding the foundational learning characteristics of the students. The researcher invested time in observing students' cognitive orientations, emotional responses, and overall attitudes toward English learning. This phase was crucial for designing a contextualized pedagogical approach that suited the learners' readiness levels. Although students showed high enthusiasm and a willingness to participate, their performance in basic tasks—such as reading the English alphabet and identifying everyday vocabulary—revealed considerable limitations. Most students struggled with phonetic articulation and word recognition, even for common items like “book” or “table.” This gap highlighted the need for a more engaging and corrective instructional method to address these basic deficiencies effectively.

Building on the insights from the first session, the second meeting introduced targeted instruction specifically focused on the proper pronunciation of the English alphabet. The session began with promising levels of motivation and attentiveness; however, as the lesson proceeded with repetitive pronunciation drills, students began to exhibit signs of boredom and disengagement. At this point, the researcher deliberately integrated a structured reward and punishment mechanism into the lesson delivery. Rewards were designed to positively reinforce accurate performance and included verbal praise, applause from peers, and the opportunity for high-performing students to assume leadership roles in peer-led activities. Punishments, while corrective rather than punitive in nature, involved asking students to repeat mispronounced words, stand and re-demonstrate pronunciation tasks, or temporarily lose their turn in interactive classroom games. These interventions were carefully framed to preserve a supportive environment while maintaining high expectations for student effort and accuracy. To sustain interest and foster deeper engagement, the session incorporated kinesthetic and auditory elements—such as the “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes” song and rhythmic clapping sequences. These activities not only helped to break the monotony but also facilitated multi-sensory learning, making it easier for students to retain and reproduce vocabulary. By the end of this session, the majority of students demonstrated marked improvement in their ability to read the English alphabet fluently and recall essential vocabulary items relevant to their immediate environment, including “chair,” “lamp,” “cable,” and “book.”

The third session expanded upon this foundation by introducing a broader range of vocabulary terms related to classroom objects such as “window,” “wall,” “door,” “floor,” and “roof.” The instructional approach maintained its dynamic, student-centered character by continuing to use rewards and punishments as central motivational tools, now enriched by more complex forms of student interaction. The researcher employed kinesthetic strategies similar to the previous session but added variety through the introduction of songs like “Marina Menari,” which encouraged coordinated physical movements synchronized with verbal practice. These combined

physical and verbal activities were instrumental in promoting memory retention and concentration. Punishments were still educational, requiring students who made mistakes—either in pronunciation or physical gestures—to repeat vocabulary exercises or reenact learning sequences. On the other hand, those who completed their tasks successfully received meaningful, participatory rewards, such as the opportunity to quiz their peers who had received punishments. This not only reinforced their own learning through retrieval practice but also cultivated a sense of collaborative accountability.

A notable outcome of this final session was the emergence of increased student responsibility and intrinsic motivation. Learners began to understand that accurate performance led to recognition and empowerment, while inaccuracy, although gently corrected, required additional effort and repetition. This structure fostered a classroom culture rooted in positive behavioral conditioning, where students learned to associate consistency, attention, and effort with immediate educational outcomes. As a result, their vocabulary acquisition improved substantially—not only in terms of quantity but also in the accuracy and confidence with which they applied the new language. Participation levels rose, engagement became more sustained, and a more meaningful connection to the learning material was established across the board.

Evidence of Enhanced Responsibility and Cognitive Engagement

Throughout the three instructional sessions, compelling evidence emerged to suggest that the implementation of the reward and punishment strategy significantly contributed to fostering a heightened sense of responsibility and cognitive engagement among students. As learners were consistently exposed to a structured cycle of task execution, feedback, correction, and reinforcement, they gradually became more attuned to the consequences of their academic behaviors. This reflective process enabled students to monitor their own learning progress and adopt a more active role in vocabulary acquisition. Rather than passively receiving instruction, students were increasingly inclined to self-correct, seek clarification, and collaborate with peers to improve their outcomes. The repeated experience of being held accountable for their performance—albeit within a supportive and non-threatening context—helped internalize a sense of academic responsibility and personal investment in their English language development.

Moreover, the interactive and enjoyable nature of the classroom environment played a crucial role in reducing the psychological barriers commonly associated with learning a foreign language. Unlike traditional instructional models that may inadvertently provoke anxiety or fear of failure, this strategy created a low-stress, playful atmosphere in which students felt safe to make mistakes and learn from them. The incorporation of physical movement, music, and peer interaction served as emotional buffers that diffused tension and built a sense of camaraderie within the group. Students frequently expressed that the classroom felt less intimidating and more stimulating, which in turn increased their motivation to attend and participate in each session.

Importantly, the reinforcement system was designed to avoid any form of humiliation or psychological discomfort. Punishments were framed not as punitive measures, but as constructive opportunities for practice and mastery. Students who were required to repeat a task did so with the understanding that improvement was both expected and achievable, rather than as a penalty for failure. This approach

helped sustain learners' dignity and confidence while simultaneously encouraging continuous effort. On the other hand, rewards—such as praise, applause, and participatory privileges—were distributed equitably, reinforcing a sense of fairness and inclusivity. As a result, students not only felt encouraged to excel individually but also became more supportive of their peers, recognizing that everyone was on a shared journey of growth and improvement.

In sum, the integration of reward and punishment not only accelerated vocabulary acquisition but also cultivated a deeper engagement with the learning process. It nurtured essential academic dispositions such as persistence, self-awareness, cooperation, and a willingness to embrace challenges. These outcomes underscore the broader educational value of well-structured behavioral strategies in language instruction, particularly for early-stage learners who benefit from a combination of cognitive stimulation and emotional support.

Summary of Learning Gains

By the conclusion of the intervention, significant and observable progress was evident among the students, demonstrating the positive impact of the reward and punishment strategies on their learning outcomes. First and foremost, most students achieved the ability to accurately recite the English alphabet, a foundational skill that was initially challenging for them. At the beginning of the intervention, many students struggled with even basic pronunciation and recognition of individual letters, but by the end of the sessions, they could confidently pronounce the alphabet without hesitation. This accomplishment was not only a testament to their growing understanding of the English language but also an indication of the effectiveness of the reinforcement techniques in enhancing their memory retention and pronunciation skills.

In addition to mastering the alphabet, there was a noticeable improvement in students' ability to recall and properly identify a range of English vocabulary, particularly related to classroom objects. Words such as "table," "chair," "lamp," "window," and "book" became more familiar and accessible to students as the sessions progressed. The introduction of rewards and punishment created a sense of urgency and responsibility that encouraged students to commit these words to memory. The combination of verbal praise, peer interaction, and corrective repetition during class activities reinforced the retention of these terms, with students reporting higher confidence in their ability to recall the vocabulary at will.

Perhaps one of the most striking gains was the increase in students' verbal confidence and pronunciation accuracy. At the outset, many students exhibited hesitation when speaking English, often due to a fear of mispronunciation or embarrassment. However, the structured reward and punishment approach provided a safe space for students to practice and refine their speaking skills. As they received praise for correct pronunciation and constructive feedback for mistakes, their verbal confidence grew. Students were more willing to take risks in speaking and demonstrate their vocabulary knowledge, which in turn led to improved pronunciation accuracy. The supportive atmosphere, reinforced by physical movement and musical activities, allowed students to relax and focus on articulating words with greater clarity.

In parallel with these cognitive and linguistic gains, students exhibited a noticeable increase in motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic. The reward and punishment system, which was designed to be playful yet constructive, contributed to a more dynamic and engaging classroom environment. Students were visibly more motivated to attend and actively participate in each session, eager to earn rewards such as applause and praise for their efforts. This heightened motivation also extended to their participation in group activities, where students demonstrated greater enthusiasm and a willingness to engage with their peers. The incorporation of physical activities, such as singing and movement, added an element of fun that helped maintain student interest and enthusiasm throughout the sessions.

In conclusion, the results of this intervention strongly suggest that the strategic application of reward and punishment, when creatively and constructively implemented, not only enhances vocabulary acquisition but also fosters positive behavioral and emotional engagement among students. This approach proved especially effective in motivating early-stage university learners of English, as it cultivated an environment where both academic growth and emotional well-being were nurtured. The gains observed in students' pronunciation, vocabulary recall, and classroom participation underscore the potential of such strategies to create a more interactive, supportive, and effective learning experience for university students.

Discussion

The research results indicate significant improvements in the English language skills of students in sessions that employed a reward (reward) and punishment (punishment) approach. This aligns with theoretical studies that highlight the effectiveness of both strategies in the context of learning. The application of reward and punishment in English instruction not only improved linguistic skills but also fostered a positive attitude toward learning and enhanced students' sense of responsibility in the learning process.

The Application of Reward in Learning

Reward, as defined by Paramarta (2016), is a form of recognition or prize given as appreciation for desired behavior. In this study, the provision of rewards, both in verbal (praise) and non-verbal (such as clapping or thumbs-up), proved effective in boosting students' motivation and engagement. For example, verbal praise such as "Good job!" or "Excellent!" not only made students feel valued but also strengthened the positive relationship between students and teachers. This aligns with Djamarah (2018), who asserts that praise is one of the most frequently used forms of reward by teachers to support students' learning motivation.

Other forms of reward, such as enjoyable activities—allowing students to lead groups or choose discussion topics—enhanced their self-confidence and intrinsic motivation. This is in line with Purwanto (2018), who states that rewards in the form of enjoyable activities can strengthen the bond between students and learning.

The Application of Punishment in Learning

Punishment, as explained by Rivai (2014), is a tool used to change student behavior that does not align with established rules and to enhance discipline. In the context of this study, the provision of punishment, such as repetition or corrective tasks (e.g., repeating mispronounced words or standing while performing a task), effectively encouraged students to correct their mistakes and pay more attention to

the rules. While the punishment was corrective, it did not create excessive pressure or embarrassment, aligning with Fahmi (2017), who emphasizes that punishment in education should be educative, not merely punitive.

More importantly, the punishment provided in this study was pedagogical, intended to improve students' understanding and skills rather than merely to penalize them. For example, if a student mispronounced a word, they were given the opportunity to correct the mistake without fear or shame, in accordance with Purwanto (2018), who asserts that effective punishment must be accountable and carry normative educational values.

Reward and Punishment as Positive Reinforcement Systems

Overall, the implementation of a reward and punishment system in this study supported a more effective English language learning process. Reward and punishment served as reinforcement tools that helped students take more responsibility for their learning. Rewards provided positive reinforcement that strengthened desired behaviors, while punishment functioned as a corrective measure, encouraging improvement without diminishing learning motivation. This aligns with the theory proposed by Handoko (2012), who states that rewards are forms of appreciation for efforts made, while punishment serves to correct behavior that does not conform to expectations.

Increased Cognitive Engagement and Learning Motivation

The research results clearly demonstrate a positive impact of the reward and punishment approach on students' cognitive engagement. Over the course of the sessions, students not only showed improvements in vocabulary mastery and pronunciation but also increased their sense of responsibility in actively participating in class. The rewards provided, both verbal and non-verbal, reinforced positive behavior, while the punishment given as a consequence of mistakes served as a deeper learning tool. This increased motivation is consistent with Mangkunegara (2013), who notes that punishment, when applied appropriately, can raise awareness and encourage students to follow rules and improve their performance.

Moreover, the inclusion of enjoyable activities as a form of reward, such as music or games, enriched students' learning experiences, making them feel more relaxed and confident. This reflects the principles outlined by Djamarah (2018), who stresses the importance of creating a fun and engaging learning environment to boost students' motivation.

Conclusion on the Application of Reward and Punishment

In conclusion, the application of reward and punishment in this English language learning study showed highly positive results in enhancing student engagement and vocabulary acquisition. Rewards provided positive reinforcement that strengthened desired behaviors, while punishment, when constructive, helped students correct their mistakes without damaging the relationship with their instructor. Thus, a creatively and adaptively applied reward and punishment system can be an effective strategy for improving the quality of learning and helping students take more responsibility for their learning process.

Conclusion

The application of the reward and punishment method to improve the English vocabulary of early-semester students at the Universitas Islam Kebangsaan Indonesia resulted in increased enthusiasm and active participation in the learning process. This method, combined with engaging activities such as clapping gestures, Marina Menari dance, the "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes" game, and animal guessing games, motivated students to master English vocabulary. Rewards included scores, praise, applause, and handmade gifts, while punishments took the form of requiring students to repeat learned material, not receiving scores, or being excluded from receiving handmade gifts.

However, as educators, it is important to avoid physical punishment and instead focus on providing treatment that encourages students to take responsibility for their tasks. The advantage of this method is that it fosters a sense of competition and maximizes student motivation for learning. On the other hand, a potential drawback is the additional cost associated with providing rewards, which may become a burden for students who have weak mental resilience, and the fact that it tends to focus more on active students. Based on the collected data, it can be concluded that the mastery of English vocabulary improved significantly, along with increased student confidence and satisfaction throughout the learning process.

References

- Ahmad, R., & Catharina, A. (2018). *Psikologi pendidikan*. Unnes.
- Bintaro, D. (2017). *Penerapan metode reward and punishment dalam pembelajaran Qur'an Hadist kelas VIII di Madrasah Tsanawiyah Negeri Temon Kec. Simo, Kab. Boyolali Tahun Ajaran 2017/2018*. IAIN Surakarta.
- Fahmi, I. (2017). *Manajemen sumber daya manusia: Teori dan aplikasi*. Alfabeta.
- Handoko, T. H. (2012). *Manajemen personalia dan sumber daya manusia*. BPFE.
- Purwanto, M. N. (2017). *Ilmu pendidikan teoretis dan praktis*. Remaja Rosda Karya.
- Mangkunegara, A. P. (2016). *Manajemen sumber daya manusia perusahaan*. Remaja Rosdakarya.

- Febryanto, M., Pratama, A., & Handayani, W. P. (2022). Pengaruh reward dan punishment terhadap kinerja karyawan. *Decision: Jurnal Sosial Ekonomi Bisnis*, 2(2).
- Mutahanah. (2016). Peran guru pendidikan agama Islam dalam mengatasi perilaku menyimpang siswa. *Jurnal Tarbawi*, 3(1).
- Paramarta, Y. A. (2016). Pengaruh reward dan punishment terhadap kinerja karyawan di lingkungan Kementerian Hukum dan Hak Asasi Manusia. *Badan Penelitian dan Pengembangan Hukum dan HAM*.
- Raihan. (2019). Penerapan reward dan punishment dalam peningkatan prestasi belajar pendidikan agama Islam terhadap siswa SMA di Kabupaten Pidie. *DAYAH: Journal of Islamic Education*, 2(1).
- Rivai, V. (2014). *Manajemen sumber daya untuk perusahaan*. Rajagrafindo.
- Djamarah, S. B. (2018). *Guru dan anak didik dalam interaksi edukatif: Suatu pendekatan teoretis psikologi*. Rieneka Cipta.
- Yunus, & Fanirin, M. H. (2021). Penerapan metode reward and punishment dalam penguasaan kosakata bahasa Arab kelas IV Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah Awaliyah Haurkolot, Indramayu. *Jurnal Pendidikan Indonesia, Institut Agama Islam Al Zaytun Indonesia*.