



Motivational Dynamics of Reward and Punishment in Shaping Students' Learning Behavior

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Abstract

Reward and punishment strategies are widely applied in EFL classrooms to manage student behaviour and enhance motivation, yet their combined motivational dynamics in the context of junior high schools remain underexplored. This study aims to investigate how systematically applied reward and punishment strategies affect students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, habitual behaviour, and learning interest. This study uses a Classroom Action Research design with a mixed approach. Qualitative data were collected through classroom observations and interviews with teachers, while quantitative data were obtained from 33 ninth-grade students using a validated questionnaire to measure students' motivation and learning behaviour. Content validity was confirmed by two expert validators. The results of the questionnaire analysis show that the provision of rewards has a positive impact on students' emotional conditions and learning motivation, with 84.8% of respondents reporting increased happiness and motivation after receiving rewards. In the context of punishment, 57.6% of students reported an improvement in behaviour. Additionally, it is indicated by classroom observations and teacher interviews that student engagement and confidence can be enhanced through direct verbal praise. On the other hand, student behaviour can be managed through the application of fair and constructive punishment, whereby reflection is encouraged rather than fear being instilled. The integration of proportional and education-based reward and punishment strategies has a positive impact on students' learning behaviour and motivation in the EFL classroom environment. These findings suggest that teachers should prioritise non-material rewards and restorative forms of punishment to encourage long-term intrinsic motivation and behavioural development.

Keywords: Motivational Dynamics; Reward and Punishment; Learning Behavior; EFL Classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

Learning motivation has long been recognized as one of the most important psychological factors influencing the success of the educational process. In the context of lower secondary education, particularly among ninth-grade students, motivation plays a central role in shaping students' willingness to learn, their commitment to classroom activities, and their consistency in completing academic tasks. This stage of schooling is especially important because students are approaching the transition to higher levels of education, while at the same time facing increasing academic demands, peer pressure, emotional changes, and social adjustments. These conditions may influence the way students engage with learning, respond to teachers' instructions, and maintain their interest in classroom activities. Therefore, strengthening students' learning motivation is not only relevant for improving academic achievement, but also for supporting their personal development and learning discipline.

Motivation can be understood as an internal and external driving force that encourages students to initiate, sustain, and direct their learning behavior. According to Rahman (2021), low motivation is one of the major barriers to success in the learning process because motivation functions as a source of energy, a guide, and a driving force that enables students to continue striving toward their learning objectives. When students possess strong motivation, they are more likely to show enthusiasm, persistence, and responsibility in learning. Conversely, students with low motivation tend to show limited participation, lack of concentration, reduced effort, and a tendency to avoid academic challenges. This indicates

that motivation is not merely a temporary emotional impulse, but a fundamental condition that determines whether students are able to engage meaningfully in the learning process.

Empirical studies have also shown that students with high levels of learning motivation generally demonstrate stronger perseverance, resilience, and tenacity when facing academic difficulties. They are more willing to participate actively in reading activities, complete assignments, ask questions, and make additional efforts to understand learning materials. Elvira Z et al. (2022) emphasized that motivated students tend not to give up easily when encountering obstacles, because motivation provides the psychological strength needed to continue learning despite difficulties. This perspective highlights the importance of developing classroom strategies that can maintain and enhance students' motivation, especially for ninth-grade students who may experience a decline in intrinsic motivation due to academic pressure, preparation for examinations, and changes in social relationships.

One strategy that has often been used to influence students' motivation and learning behavior is the application of reward and punishment. Reward refers to positive reinforcement given to students after they demonstrate desirable learning behavior, such as active participation, task completion, discipline, improvement, or achievement. Rewards may take the form of verbal praise, appreciation, points, certificates, privileges, or other forms of recognition. Meanwhile, punishment refers to corrective actions given when students display inappropriate behavior, such as lack of discipline, failure to complete assignments, disruptive classroom conduct, or repeated negligence. In educational practice, punishment should not be understood as a harsh or harmful action, but rather as a pedagogical mechanism intended to guide students back toward expected norms and responsible behavior.

Previous empirical findings suggest that reward and punishment can contribute positively to students' learning motivation when applied systematically and appropriately. A quantitative study conducted at SMP Negeri 1 Pandaan found that the systematic use of reward and punishment strategies explained 44.7% of the variation in students' learning motivation in music lessons. This finding indicates that reward and punishment have a significant contribution to student motivation, even in a specific subject-based learning context (Prawirahati, H. S., Octavianingrum, D., & Heldisari, 2023). The result also suggests that students' motivation can be influenced by instructional strategies that provide clear consequences for both positive and negative learning behavior.

In line with this finding, Fernando et al. (2024) reported a statistically significant relationship between structured reward-punishment systems and student motivation in English learning within Islamic boarding school contexts. Their study showed that rewards in the form of praise, appreciation, and tangible incentives can stimulate students' enthusiasm and encourage them to repeat positive learning behaviors. At the same time, punishment, when applied fairly and proportionally, may function as a corrective mechanism that helps students recognize inappropriate behavior and adjust themselves to classroom expectations. These findings confirm that reward and punishment are not merely disciplinary tools, but can also be understood as motivational design strategies that influence students' attitudes, participation, and engagement in learning.

Nevertheless, the use of reward and punishment in education must be approached critically. Although many studies report positive effects, their effectiveness depends heavily on how they are implemented, how students perceive them, and whether they support or undermine students' intrinsic motivation. Rewards that are given excessively may cause students to learn only for external incentives, while punishments that are applied harshly or inconsistently may create fear, anxiety, or resistance. Therefore, reward and punishment should be designed carefully, communicated clearly, and implemented consistently so that they support students' learning behavior without reducing their autonomy, confidence, and sense of responsibility.

Despite the growing number of studies on reward and punishment, several scholarly gaps remain. First, most existing studies rely heavily on quantitative designs, which are useful for measuring relationships between variables but often provide limited insight into students' mental, emotional, and personal interpretations of reward and punishment. Second, previous research tends to analyze the effects of reward and punishment separately, rather than situating them within broader instructional and motivational

frameworks. As a result, there is still a need for studies that examine how students interpret, experience, and respond to reward and punishment in real classroom situations.

Based on these considerations, this study examines how reward and punishment, as motivational design strategies, affect the learning behavior of ninth-grade junior high school students. This research is guided by three questions: How does the implementation of rewards and punishments enhance the learning behavior of ninth-grade junior high school students? To what extent does the implementation of reward and punishment influence students' learning behavior in classroom activities? How do students interpret and respond to reward and punishment strategies in relation to their learning motivation and behavior?

METHOD

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods descriptive design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and integrated at the interpretation stage to provide a comprehensive understanding of how reward and punishment strategies influence students' motivation and learning behavior (Y. R. Fitri & Ain, 2022). This design was selected because it enables a triangulated analysis of behavioral engagement and motivational response across multiple data sources without the cyclical intervention structure characteristic of Classroom Action Research.

Participants

The study was conducted in one of the junior high schools in Medan, Indonesia. The participants conducted 33 ninth-grade students, including 21 females and 12 males, aged between 14 and 15 years, with an intermediate level of English proficiency. This class was deliberately selected due to the teacher's consistent implementation of structured reward and punishment strategies over the course of one academic semester, thereby offering an appropriate setting for investigating the motivational dynamics central to this study. This sampling aimed for students who directly experienced the application of the reward and punishment systems in the learning process as rewards have been shown to contribute effectively to students' motivation and learning achievement (Indrawati et al., 2021).

Data collection was conducted through three principal instruments: (1) a 20-item Likert-scale questionnaire measuring indicators of discipline, compliance with rules, class activity involvement, task responsibility, and attitudes toward learning; (2) structured classroom observation sheets documenting forms of student behavioral involvement; and (3) semi-structured teacher interviews exploring experiences and interpretations of reward and punishment implementation. Data validity was ensured through triangulation across instruments and expert content validation.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were employed a convergent mixed-methods with descriptive statistic, including means, percentages, frequencies for quantitative data. Mean scores were interpreted using a four-point Likert scale with the following criteria: 3.26–4.00 categorized as very high, 2.51–3.25 as high, 1.76–2.50 as low, and 1.00–1.75 as very low. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis through several stages: transcription of interview and observation data, initial coding of meaningful units (e.g., "student engagement," "teacher feedback"), categorization of similar codes, and development of overarching themes reflecting recurring patterns. Data triangulation was conducted by comparing interview and classroom observation findings to ensure consistency, while the coding process was also reviewed by an independent researcher to enhance credibility and minimize bias. Findings were integrated via methodological triangulation for comprehensive understanding the effect of reward-punishment on students' learning behavior (Fitri & Ain, 2022; Munif & Wahidiyah, 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section reports findings from a mixed-methods study exploring motivational dynamics of reward and punishment in shaping the learning behaviour of ninth-grade students. Data were obtained through a questionnaire administered to 33 students, direct classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews with the English teacher. Findings are organized by quantitative and qualitative data types before integration in the discussion.

Quantitative Data: Questionnaire Survey Results

The quantitative aspect of this study was conducted using a multiple-choice questionnaire consisting of 20 items, which was distributed to 33 ninth-grade students. Each item provided four alternative responses aligned with the key variables, namely rewards (X1, items 1, 3, 4, 6, 9, 11, 13, 14, 16, 19), punishments (X2, items 2, 5, 7, 10, 12, 15, 17, 18), and learning motivation (Y, items 8, 13, 20). This instrument was designed to assess students' perceptions, emotional responses, and behavioral tendencies regarding the implementation of reward and punishment within the classroom setting.

Table 1. Students' Responses to Reward (X1)

No	Question Item	Most Frequent Response	n	%
1	Feeling when teachers gives reward	Happy and more motivated to learn	28	84.8%
3	Type of reward preferred most	Good grades	15	45.5%
4	Why teachers give rewards	To appreciate effort	14	43.8%
6	How rewards influence study habits	Make me study harder	15	45.5%
9	Response when friend get reward	Feel inspired	14	42.4%
11	Do rewards make learning more enjoyable?	Yes, they make learning fun	16	48.5%
13	Which is more effective: reward or punishment?	Depends on situation	14	42.4%
14	What students do after being rewarded	Maintain performance	12	36.4%
16	How rewards affect confidence	Increase confidence	16	48.5%
19	Most meaningful type or reward	Positive feedback	13	39.4%

The questionnaire data reveal that a large proportion of ninth-grade students, specifically 84.8% (n=28), reported feeling 'happy and more motivated to learn' upon receiving praise from their teachers. This finding highlights the significant affective influence of reward-based strategies in enhancing student motivation within the lower secondary school context, particularly as adolescents tend to be responsive to social acknowledgment and validation from authority figures. In addition, 'good grades' were reported as the most preferred type of reward (45.5%), followed by 'verbal praise' (24.2%) and 'positive feedback' (18.2%). These results suggest that students at this level place greater importance on forms of academic recognition compared to tangible material incentives.

With regard to the influence of rewards on the formation of study habits, 45.5% of students reported that rewards 'make me study harder', whereas 27.3% indicated that rewards 'encourage consistency' in their learning. These results imply that the motivational effects of rewards extend beyond short-term emotional gratification and contribute to more enduring changes in students' learning behaviour. In addition, when asked about their reactions to classmates who received rewards, 42.4% of students reported feeling 'inspired', while 36.4% "feel motivated to compete". Taken together, these findings suggest that rewards not only affect those who directly receive them but also help cultivate a constructive competitive environment within the classroom. The social aspect of reward implementation—particularly its capacity to influence observing students—emerges as an important pedagogical insight with clear implications for the design of effective classroom management practices.

Table 2. Students' Responses to Punishment (X2)

No	Question Item	Most Frequent Response	n	%
2	Feeling when receiving punishment	Reflective about my behavior	11	33.3%
5	Why teachers give punishment	To make students responsible	12	36.4%
7	How punishment affects learning behavior	Makes me more disciplined/think before acting	11	33.3%
10	Response when friend gets punished	Learn from their mistake	20	60.6%

No	Question Item	Most Frequent Response	n	%
12	Do punishment help you become better?	Yes, they teach discipline	16	48.5%
15	What students do after being punished?	Improve behavior	19	57.6%
17	How punishment affect confidence	Build Responsibility	15	45.5%
18	What kind of punishment is fair?	Reflection activity	11	33.3%

The most dominant emotional reaction following punishment was 'reflective about my behavior' (33.3%), followed by 'more careful in the future' (27.3%) and 'motivated to improve' (24.2%). Notably, 60.6% of respondents—the highest proportion among all questionnaire response categories—indicated that they 'learn from their friend's mistake' when witnessing a peer receive punishment. This finding indicates that punishment serves a dual function, operating as both an individual corrective strategy and a medium for vicarious learning within the classroom's social structure. In terms of intended behaviors following punishment, 57.6% reported they would 'improve behavior', while 30.3% indicated a tendency to 'reflect on actions'. Students' preference for 'reflection activity' (33.3%) and 'logical consequences' (30.3%) as equitable forms of punishment highlights a restorative rather than purely punitive orientation among ninth-grade learners.

Table 3. Students' Responses to the Combined Influence of Reward and Punishment (Y)

No	Question Item	Most Frequent Response	n	%
8	Which situation motivates you more?	Depends on the situation	14	42.4%
13	Which is more effective for you?	Depends on situation	14	42.4%
20	How do reward and punishment together influence behavior?	Help me improve	13	39.4%

The overall analysis of motivational outcomes reveals that students predominantly adopt a viewpoint characterized by both contextual sensitivity and integrative reasoning. In relation to Item 8 and Item 13, the response selected most frequently was 'it depends on the situation,' each accounting for 42.4% of the responses, while 30.3% (Item 8) and 33.3% (Item 13) of participants indicated that rewards and punishments are equally effective or yield optimal results when implemented in combination. Taken together, these two response categories comprise approximately 72.7% of all answers to the motivation-related items, suggesting that most ninth grade students demonstrate a balanced and moderate stance toward the use of rewards and punishments, avoiding both exclusive preference and outright dismissal of either approach. Additionally, when asked to describe how the interplay of these strategies influences their behavior, the most prevalent response was 'helps me improve' (39.4%), followed by 'guides my learning' (21.2%) and 'makes me disciplined' (21.2%). This pattern indicates that students tend to interpret the joint application of rewards and punishments as a cohesive framework that facilitates comprehensive academic growth, rather than perceiving it as a simple binary opposition between incentives and deterrents.

Qualitative Data: Observation and Teacher Interview

Classroom Observation

observational evidence shows that rewards in the form of verbal praise and recognition of academic achievements trigger a rapid increase in student engagement, where publicly praised students display signs of higher confidence such as upright posture, consistent eye contact, and sustained activity, with ripple effects spreading to classmates through increased attention, leaning forward, more frequent hand-raising, and stronger participation encouragement after witnessing a peer being rewarded—this aligns with questionnaire results where 42.4% of students felt "inspired" when a friend was rewarded.

The implementation of corrective strategies such as verbal warnings and reflective tasks has proven effective in managing student behaviour within the same session, with low-participation students showing better focus after calm and respectful feedback, accompanied by a social learning effect where other students become more alert after witnessing sanctions applied politely without creating a threatening atmosphere. This is consistent with

57.6% of questionnaire respondents who reported intending to 'improve behavior' following punishment.

Teacher Interview

Interview data obtained from Teacher T-01 confirmed that rewards and punishments were identified as important elements in shaping students' motivation toward learning. Verbal praise, including expressions such as "very good," was described as an effective form of reward that fosters a positive learning atmosphere and encourages students' internal drive to achieve. In addition, receiving good grades was reported to increase students' feelings of happiness and confidence, ultimately encouraging them to improve their academic achievement in subsequent lessons.

On the other hand, the implementation of punishment is likewise considered an effective strategy for enhancing discipline and reinforcing students' responsibility, provided that it is administered fairly, constructively, and without authoritarian practices. Minor forms of punishment, including extra coursework and reflective tasks, can promote students' self-reflection on their behaviour instead of encouraging compliance rooted in fear. Teachers also emphasized that the balanced integration of rewards and punishments is an effective method for developing adaptive motivation suited to diverse classroom contexts. Recent research confirms that the balanced application of reward and punishment significantly enhances students' enthusiasm for learning and shapes positive learning behaviors, as both strategies play a crucial role when implemented thoughtfully (Sinaga, 2022). Moreover, witnessing classmates receive rewards or disciplinary actions can influence students' behavioural patterns collectively, while also enhancing socio-emotional classroom dynamics that contribute to a productive learning environment. Overall, these findings emphasize the necessity of integrating positive reinforcement with constructive discipline in order to strengthen student motivation and behavioural development in lower secondary education.

Discussion

The application of reward and punishment has proven to play an important role in shaping adaptive learning behaviour for ninth-grade students. The finding that 84.8% of students feel happier and more motivated when receiving praise affirms that social and academic recognition from school authorities significantly impact adolescent motivation. This is consistent with the concept of positive reinforcement in Skinner's behaviorism theory, which explains that rewards as stimuli strengthen desired behavior. The prevalence of preferences for non-material rewards—verbal praise and affirmative feedback—reflects the importance of recognition and competence needs highlighted in Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory for fostering intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the overuse of external rewards may lead to the *overjustification effect*, a situation in which students' intrinsic motivation declines as a result of reliance on external incentives. From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, rewards that are not applied in a balanced manner can redirect students' learning orientation from genuine internal interest toward merely obtaining rewards, thereby reducing their long-term capacity to develop independent learning. Beyond motivational balance, contextual factors such as EFL learning environments further influence how rewards function. In the context of EFL learning, the use of verbal praise plays a more significant role because it relates to the level of language anxiety. Students often experience fear when using a foreign language, so verbal praise and positive feedback can help reduce that anxiety and increase the willingness to participate, especially in speaking activities.

In practical classroom settings, these theoretical considerations are reflected in observable student behaviour. The impact of rewards and punishments on learning behaviour is directly observable through increased academic engagement, discipline, and active participation. Open verbal praise not only boosts the rewarded student's self-confidence but creates a social effect encouraging other students to become more focused and motivated. The finding that 60.6% of students learn from peers' mistakes indicates that punishment serves as a means of social learning in reinforcing classroom norms. These results align with social cognitive theory's emphasis on observational learning and peer modeling (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). The proportional and adaptive implementation of rewards and punishments enhances both students' self-regulation and collective academic

engagement (nazariah & Dewi, 2023). However, disproportionate or unfair punishment can cause anxiety, fear, and resistance among students, which ultimately has the potential to hinder learning engagement and damage the relationship between teachers and students.

Students' interpretations of and responses to reward and punishment strategies are strongly determined by how clearly teachers convey the underlying reasons, uphold fairness, and maintain a logical relationship between actions and their consequences. When rewards are perceived as authentic recognition of students' efforts, they gradually foster intrinsic motivation, moving beyond simple task completion driven by external incentives. Punishments perceived as fair and clearly explained function not as threatening experiences but as opportunities for reflection and improvement, as evidenced by 33.3% choosing to reflect and 57.6% planning behavioral change.

Furthermore, from a pedagogical perspective, punishment can function as an educational tool when applied appropriately. Punishment, when implemented in an educational and controlled manner, can serve as a motivational tool that not only limits inappropriate behavior but also promotes students' awareness and responsibility in the learning process (Nur et al., 2022). When punishment is applied correctly, students view both mechanisms as a natural part of their learning process rather than as external pressures consistent with Amiruddin et al. (2022) findings that students accept reward and punishment enthusiastically, albeit preferring rewards. Teachers' consistency and fairness constitute the crucial foundation for positive student responses.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings using a mixed methods approach, it can be concluded that the application of reward and punishment has a positive impact on the learning behaviour of ninth-grade students. Quantitative data shows that 84.8% of students experienced an increase in motivation after receiving rewards, particularly in the form of good grades, verbal praise, and positive feedback, which contributed to an increase in self-confidence, class participation, and learning consistency. This finding is supported by previous research stating that "there is an improvement in student motivation through the optimization of reward and punishment methods". On the other hand, 57.6% of students showed behavioural changes after receiving punishment, while 60.6% of students stated that they learned from the mistakes of peers who received punishment, indicating the occurrence of observational learning. Observation results reveal that rewards tend to produce a more sustainable motivational impact on student learning engagement, while punishment provides a quicker corrective effect in shaping discipline. Furthermore, the interview results confirm that the combination of reward and punishment applied proportionally and educationally is the most effective strategy in fostering positive learning behaviour.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the results of this study, teachers and school administrators are encouraged to develop a more structured and consistent reward and punishment framework that emphasizes the enhancement of students' intrinsic motivation rather than merely promoting short-term compliance. Non-material rewards should be given greater emphasis, particularly in the form of verbal praise, acknowledgment of students' efforts, and constructive academic feedback, as these approaches have demonstrated greater effectiveness in improving students' self-confidence. In contrast, punishment should be applied through educational strategies that include reflective assignments, logical consequences, and restorative practices to help students recognise their mistakes without causing psychological distress. In the academic sphere, this study also paves the way for more in-depth mixed-methods research into the dynamics of adolescent learning motivation at secondary school level. Further studies are recommended to employ experimental and longitudinal approaches to assess the long-term effectiveness of rewards and punishments, expand the scope of participants to include those from various regions, and integrate moderating variables such as students' psychological conditions, family support, and classroom climate. Such efforts are necessary to address the limitations of the current study whilst enhancing the external validity of findings in subsequent research.

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