EXPLORING TEACHERS' LIVED EXPERIENCES WITH CLASSROOM REINFORCEMENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract

This study explores the lived experiences of Vietnamese first-grade English teachers in employing reinforcement strategies to enhance student engagement. It examines the effectiveness of these strategies, identifies challenges in their implementation, and provides recommendations for improving student participation in early childhood education settings. Understanding how reinforcement influences student behavior and learning outcomes is essential in refining classroom management practices and optimizing student engagement.

A qualitative, phenomenological research design was used to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten first-grade English teachers from the Viet Anh School System. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and insights related to classroom reinforcement strategies. This approach provided a comprehensive exploration of how teachers utilize reinforcement and the impact it has on student motivation and participation.

Findings revealed that positive reinforcement, including verbal praise, tangible rewards, and constructive feedback, significantly influenced student engagement. Teachers observed that these strategies encouraged students to participate actively and develop confidence in their abilities. However, challenges such as maintaining fairness in reinforcement distribution, preventing over-reliance on external rewards, and adapting strategies to meet diverse learner needs were also noted. The study found that personalized and culturally sensitive reinforcement approaches were more effective in fostering motivation, suggesting that a one-size-fits-all method may not be suitable for all students.

This research contributes to early childhood education by providing insights into the complex relationship between reinforcement strategies and student engagement. The findings emphasize the importance of balancing extrinsic and intrinsic motivation to create an engaging and effective classroom environment. Educators and policymakers can use these insights to refine teaching practices and develop professional development programs focused on reinforcement strategies that support diverse learners.

The study concludes that while reinforcement strategies play a crucial role in motivating students, their effectiveness depends on thoughtful implementation. Teachers must carefully balance rewards and encouragement to sustain engagement while fostering intrinsic motivation. Structured, transparent, and flexible reinforcement systems can help optimize student learning experiences and classroom participation.

Based on these findings, the study recommends that teachers utilize a combination of verbal praise, constructive feedback, and tangible rewards to support student motivation while ensuring clear and fair reinforcement criteria to maintain equity in the classroom. Gradually transitioning from extrinsic rewards to intrinsic motivators is suggested to prevent over-dependence on tangible incentives. Additionally, teachers should personalize reinforcement strategies to accommodate diverse learning needs and cultural backgrounds. Finally, professional development programs focusing on effective reinforcement techniques

in early childhood education should be implemented to support teachers in applying these strategies effectively.

Key Words: *Vietnamese English Language Teachers, Reinforcement Strategies in Education, Student Engagement, Teachers' Experiences with Reinforcement, Student Motivation Strategies*

Introduction

Class participation is a fundamental aspect of early childhood education, playing a critical role in students' cognitive and social development. Active engagement in class discussions enhances learning retention, critical thinking, and communication skills. However, ensuring participation among young learners presents challenges, as students possess varying levels of interest, motivation, and abilities. Teachers must navigate these differences while maintaining an engaging classroom environment that fosters meaningful interactions and learning experiences.

One common approach to encouraging participation is the use of reinforcement strategies. Positive reinforcement, such as verbal praise and tangible rewards, incentivizes students to engage in class discussions by associating participation with favorable outcomes. Conversely, negative reinforcement involves removing undesirable conditions when students display the desired behavior. While these methods have been widely applied in classrooms, their effectiveness varies, as some students may not respond consistently to rewards or consequences.

Additionally, research indicates that young children, particularly those aged 6-7 years, have an average attention span of only 8-12 minutes, significantly shorter than the typical 45-50-minute class period. This limited focus span makes it difficult for teachers to sustain student engagement throughout lessons. Even well-planned motivational activities may fail to maintain interest over time, leading to disengagement and passive learning behaviors.

As a result, traditional reinforcement techniques alone may not be sufficient to address these challenges, underscoring the need for innovative and adaptive motivational strategies.

Current research in early childhood education emphasizes the importance of reinforcement in enhancing student participation. Studies have shown that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators influence classroom behavior, yet there remains an ongoing debate regarding the long-term impact of reinforcement strategies. Some scholars argue that excessive reliance on extrinsic rewards may diminish intrinsic motivation, while others advocate for structured reinforcement systems that balance immediate incentives with the development of self-regulation skills. Despite these insights, there is still a lack of comprehensive research exploring how first-grade teachers experience and implement reinforcement strategies in culturally diverse educational settings, particularly in Vietnamese classrooms.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the lived experiences of first-grade English teachers in Vietnam as they employ reinforcement strategies to enhance student participation. By exploring the effectiveness, challenges, and adaptations of these methods, the study provides insights into best practices for fostering engagement among young learners. Through a phenomenological approach, the research captures teachers' perspectives on reinforcement's role in classroom dynamics, offering practical recommendations for educators seeking to optimize student motivation.

If reinforcement strategies significantly influence student participation, then identifying the most effective techniques and their potential drawbacks can contribute to the development of evidence-based teaching practices. The study hypothesizes that a balanced approach to reinforcement—integrating both extrinsic rewards and intrinsic motivation—will yield the most sustainable improvements in student engagement. By bridging theoretical insights with practical applications, this research aims to inform future instructional strategies, ensuring that reinforcement is used effectively to create dynamic and responsive learning environments.

Methods

The research methodology serves as the foundation for this study, outlining the procedures for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This chapter details the research design, population, sampling technique, research instruments, data gathering procedure, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

This study employed a **phenomenological qualitative research design** to explore the lived experiences of **Vietnamese first-grade English teachers** regarding the use of reinforcement strategies in classroom settings. The phenomenological approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of how teachers experience and experience reinforcement in their teaching practices.

Data collection was conducted through **semi-structured interviews**, which allowed for open-ended responses while ensuring consistency across participants. The phenomenological method facilitated a comprehensive exploration of teachers' experiences, challenges, and perspectives on the effectiveness of reinforcement techniques in promoting student participation.

Population, Sample, and Sampling Technique

The **population** for this study comprised **first-grade English teachers at Viet Anh School 2 in Vietnam**. The **sample** included **10 first-grade English teachers**, selected using **purposive sampling**.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Vietnamese English teachers currently teaching **Grade 1**.

- Minimum of **two years of teaching experience** at the primary level.

- Experience using **reinforcement strategies** to enhance student engagement.

Sampling Technique:

A **purposive sampling technique** was applied, ensuring that participants met specific criteria relevant to the study. The **convenience sampling approach** was also utilized within this framework to select participants who were **accessible and willing** to participate.

Research Instrument

The primary research instrument for this study was the **semi-structured interview guide**, which was developed based on existing literature on reinforcement strategies and student motivation. The interview questions focused on:

- Teachers' reinforcement strategies.

- Perceived effectiveness of reinforcement techniques.

- Challenges in implementing reinforcement.

- Adaptations to reinforcement strategies based on diverse student needs.

Dependability and Credibility of the Instrument:

- **Expert validation:** The interview guide was reviewed by an expert in educational research to ensure clarity and relevance.

- **Pilot testing:** The instrument was tested on **two teachers** to refine the clarity of the questions and ensure ease of understanding.

Data Gathering Procedure

The data collection process followed a structured **four-step** approach:

1. **Participant Recruitment:** Teachers who met the inclusion criteria were identified and invited to participate. They were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and ethical considerations.

2. **Informed Consent:** Participants were provided with **informed consent forms**, ensuring they voluntarily agreed to participate. Confidentiality was assured, and pseudonyms were assigned to protect their identities.

3. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Face-to-face interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately **25–35 minutes**. With participants' permission, interviews were **audio-recorded** and later transcribed verbatim.

4. **Data Organization:** Transcripts were compiled and categorized according to

the study's research questions to facilitate systematic analysis.

Thematic Analysis of Data

Data analysis was conducted using **thematic analysis**, following **Colaizzi's seven-step method**:

1. **Familiarization:** Reading and re-reading interview transcripts to identify key statements.

2. **Significant Statements Extraction:** Identifying meaningful phrases related to reinforcement experiences.

3. **Formulating Meanings:** Assigning interpretations to extracted statements.

4. **Clustering Themes:** Grouping similar meanings to develop themes.

5. **Developing an Exhaustive Description:** Creating a detailed narrative of teachers' reinforcement experiences.

6. **Formulating a Fundamental Structure:** Refining themes and ensuring coherence.

7. **Member Checking:** Participants were given a summary of findings to validate the accuracy of interpretations.

Additionally, **NVivo software** was used to aid in data organization and coding.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical research principles to protect participants' rights:

- **Ethical Approval:** The study was approved by the **Philippine Christian University Board**.

- **Informed Consent:** Participants signed consent forms after being briefed on the study's objectives, risks, and benefits.

- **Confidentiality:** Pseudonyms were assigned, and interview data were securely stored.

- **Voluntary Participation:** Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequences.

Results

This chapter presents the findings of the study on the lived experiences of Vietnamese first-grade English teachers in employing reinforcement strategies to enhance student participation. Data from semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis following Colaizzi's method. The findings are presented according to the major themes that emerged from the data.

The results revealed that teachers primarily used three types of reinforcement strategies: verbal praise, tangible rewards, and constructive feedback. Verbal praise was the most commonly used technique, as teachers found that immediate recognition of student efforts encouraged participation and built confidence. Teachers reported that simple statements such as "Great job!" or "Well done!" led to noticeable improvements in students' willingness to engage in class activities. Tangible rewards, including stickers and certificates, were also widely used to motivate students, particularly younger learners. However, some teachers expressed concerns about students developing an over-reliance on these rewards, which could diminish their intrinsic motivation. Constructive feedback was

another reinforcement strategy that teachers found valuable, as it provided students with clear guidance on their progress while maintaining a positive learning environment.

Table 1. Reinforcement Strategies Used by Teachers

Reinforcement Strategy	Description	Example from Participants' Responses
Verbal Praise	Immediate, non-material acknowledgment of student efforts and behavior	"I often use verbal praise because it brings immediate effects." (P2)
Tangible Rewards	Stickers, certificates, small prizes used to motivate participation	"I give stickers to students who complete their tasks on time." (P6)
Constructive Feedback	Specific, actionable insights for improvement	"I balance my feedback with encouragement so they don't feel discouraged." (P10

The findings further indicated that reinforcement strategies had a significant impact on student engagement, particularly in terms of participation, confidence, and collaboration. Teachers observed that students who were initially hesitant to participate in class discussions became more active when reinforcement was applied consistently. Many teachers noted that

verbal praise helped even the shyest students raise their hands and answer questions more frequently. Reinforcement also played a crucial role in boosting students' confidence, as it made them feel valued and encouraged them to take risks in their learning. In addition, teachers found that using group-based reinforcement, such as collective points or shared rewards, fostered a sense of teamwork among students. This approach encouraged students to collaborate, support one another, and engage more actively in class activities.

Table 2. Impact of Reinforcement on Student Engagement

Impact	Description	Example from Participants' Responses
Participation	Increased willingness to answer questions and join class discussions	*"After using reinforcement, I noticed my quieter students raising their hands more often." (P4)*
Confidence	Enhanced self-assurance in learning	*"Even when they make mistakes, they feel encouraged to keep going." (P7)*
Collaboration	Greater teamwork and group participation	*"Students started helping each other when group rewards were introduced." (P10)*

Despite the benefits of reinforcement strategies, teachers encountered several challenges in their implementation. One of the most significant challenges was ensuring fairness in the distribution of reinforcement. Some students compared the rewards they received with their peers, leading to perceptions of favoritism. Teachers had to be mindful of maintaining consistency in how reinforcement was applied to avoid potential conflicts. Another challenge was the risk of students becoming overly dependent on external rewards. Some teachers noticed that students expected a tangible reward for every task completed, making it difficult to transition them toward intrinsic motivation. Additionally, adapting reinforcement strategies to diverse learning needs posed difficulties, as students had different preferences and responses to reinforcement. Teachers found that tailoring reinforcement to individual student needs required careful observation and flexibility.

Table 3. Challenges in Applying Reinforcement Strategies

Challenge	Description	Example from Participants' Responses
Fairness	Ensuring equal reward distribution	*"It's difficult to ensure that every student feels equally rewarded." (P10)*
Over-dependence on Rewards	Risk of students expecting incentives for every task	*"Some students only performed tasks when they expected a reward." (P9)*
Adapting to Diverse Needs	Customizing reinforcement for different learning styles	*"Every student responds differently to reinforcement, so it's hard to find a strategy that works for everyone." (P4)*

Despite these challenges, teachers reported notable successes in using reinforcement to motivate students. Many observed that students

responded positively to immediate and clear feedback, which helped them understand their progress and areas for improvement. Teachers also found that reinforcement strategies contributed to building students' confidence, leading to increased participation in classroom discussions and activities. Personalized reinforcement approaches, such as allowing students to choose their rewards or modifying reinforcement techniques based on individual preferences, were particularly effective in maintaining engagement. Teachers highlighted that students were more likely to stay motivated when reinforcement strategies were varied and tailored to their specific needs.

Table 4. Successes in Using Reinforcement to Motivate Students

Success	Description	Example from Participants' Responses
Increased Engagement	More active participation in classroom activities	*"Reinforcement helps students feel comfortable expressing their opinions." (P10)*
Boosted Confidence	Encouragement led to greater student self-confidence	*"A shy student who received praise consistently became more active in class." (P4)*
Sustained Motivation	Students showed long-term interest in learning	*"I gradually reduced stickers and encouraged students to feel proud of their efforts." (P7)*

To accommodate diverse learners, teachers adjusted their reinforcement strategies by incorporating a combination of verbal praise, tangible rewards, and constructive feedback. They found that giving students choices in how they received reinforcement improved engagement and motivation. Some teachers used a flexible approach, alternating between individual and group-based reinforcement depending on the students' needs. Others emphasized the importance of gradually reducing tangible rewards while increasing verbal and social reinforcement to foster long-term intrinsic motivation. Teachers also adapted reinforcement methods to suit different cultural backgrounds and learning styles, ensuring that reinforcement remained relevant and meaningful to all students.

Table 5. Adaptation of Reinforcement Strategies

Adaptation	Description	Example from Participants' Responses
Personalized Reinforcement	Allowing students to choose rewards based on preferences	*"I noticed that when I let students choose their rewards, they became more engaged and motivated." (P4)*
Flexible Reinforcement Techniques	Adjusting reinforcement based on student engagement levels	*"I switch between verbal praise and tangible rewards depending on the situation." (P6)*

The results of the study suggest that reinforcement strategies play a critical role in shaping student behavior and engagement in the classroom. While verbal praise, tangible rewards, and constructive feedback were effective in increasing participation and motivation, teachers

needed to be mindful of maintaining fairness and avoiding over-reliance on external rewards. The findings highlight the importance of adapting reinforcement strategies to accommodate diverse learners and fostering a balance between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. By employing personalized and flexible reinforcement techniques, teachers were able to create a more engaging and supportive learning environment for their students.

Discussion

This study explored the experiences of **Vietnamese first-grade English teachers** in using **reinforcement strategies** to enhance student participation. The findings revealed that **verbal praise, tangible rewards, and constructive feedback** were the primary reinforcement strategies used. Verbal praise was the most effective, as it provided **immediate encouragement** and helped build confidence. Tangible rewards, such as stickers and certificates, were useful but raised concerns about **student over-reliance**. Constructive feedback allowed teachers to **motivate and guide** students effectively.

Reinforcement strategies positively impacted **student participation, confidence, and collaboration**. However, teachers faced challenges such as **ensuring fairness in rewards, preventing reward dependency, and adapting strategies to diverse learners**. Many teachers personalized their approach by allowing students to **choose their preferred reinforcement methods** and gradually shifting toward **intrinsic motivation**.

The findings align with research on **self-determination theory**, **growth mindset theory**, and **differentiated instruction**, emphasizing

the **balance between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation**. Similar to previous studies, this research highlights the importance of **structured reinforcement** to avoid **favoritism and disengagement**.

Despite its contributions, this study had limitations, including **a small sample size**, reliance on **teacher perspectives only**, and a **focus on English language classrooms**. Future research should include **student perspectives**, expand to **different subjects and grade levels**, and use **mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative approaches)** for stronger validation.

To enhance classroom engagement, the study recommends **teacher training on reinforcement strategies**, the development of **fair reward systems**, and a gradual shift from **extrinsic to intrinsic motivation**. Additionally, **student input should be considered**, and further research should explore reinforcement in **various educational contexts**.

Overall, the study confirms that reinforcement strategies **significantly impact student engagement** but must be **carefully structured and personalized** to be effective in **early childhood education**.

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