

Fostering Students' Motivation through Teachers' Verbal Reinforcement: Insights from an Indonesian EFL Classroom

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Receive : 15 November 2025

Accepted: 15 January 2026

Published: 22 January 2026

KEYWORDS

*Verbal Reinforcement
Learning Motivation
English Learning
Qualitative Study
EFL pedagogy*

LICENSE



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how teachers' verbal reinforcement influences students' motivation to learn English at SMPN 40 Makassar. Employing a descriptive qualitative design, data were gathered through six classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with three English teachers and seven eighth-grade students, and documentation. The findings reveal that verbal reinforcement expressed through praise, affirmation, positive feedback, and personalization significantly enhances students' motivation, confidence, and participation. Teachers' consistent and context-sensitive use of encouraging language reduced anxiety, promoted active engagement, and fostered long-term interest in English learning. Students reported feeling recognized and supported when their efforts were acknowledged verbally, even in cases of partial or incorrect responses. The study concludes that authentic verbal reinforcement not only strengthens students' intrinsic motivation but also functions as an affective pedagogical strategy that nurtures emotional connection and communicative confidence in EFL classrooms. Theoretically, the study contributes to understanding how verbal reinforcement, viewed through Self-Determination and Growth Mindset frameworks, operates as a motivational mechanism within teacher-student interactions.

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Citation in APA style: Hamid, K., Sunra, L., & Ariyanti, A. (2026). Fostering Students Motivation through Teachers Verbal Reinforcement: Insights from an Indonesian EFL Classroom. (2026). *Journal of English Culture, Language, Literature and Education*, 14(1), 14-34. <https://doi.org/10.53682/cv3drk35>

INTRODUCTION

In many Indonesian EFL classrooms, students often exhibit hesitation, low confidence, and limited motivation to engage in communicative English learning. This challenge is not merely linguistic but also emotional and relational. Learners frequently associate English performance with fear of mistakes, resulting in passive classroom behavior and avoidance of speaking opportunities. Such affective barriers highlight the importance of the teacher's interpersonal communication style particularly the use of verbal reinforcement that acknowledges effort and builds emotional safety. As noted by Scales and Roehlkepartain (2020), the quality of the teacher-student relationship strongly influences students' academic outcomes, motivation, and classroom participation. Teachers who establish positive relationships and provide consistent encouragement tend to foster more active, confident, and motivated learners.

In many Indonesian contexts, however, students remain passive, responding only when called upon and rarely initiating English communication. Lessons frequently emphasize content mastery and grammatical accuracy rather than interaction, feedback, or emotional support. Consequently, students often focus on avoiding mistakes rather than expressing ideas or developing fluency. This pattern leads to low engagement, limited self-confidence, and decreased willingness to communicate in the target language (see Rahmat, 2023; Syafitri & Khairunnisa, 2024). Such classroom tendencies underscore the crucial role of teachers' verbal reinforcement in motivating learners and creating emotionally supportive environments that encourage active participation.

A key factor that strengthens the teacher-student relationship is reinforcement, as originally proposed by Bandura (1977) in Social Learning Theory and Skinner (1957) in Operant Conditioning Theory. Both theories emphasize that learning behavior is shaped by the consequences of actions. When learners receive positive responses such as praise, acknowledgment, or encouragement they are more likely to repeat desirable behaviors in the future. In educational contexts, reinforcement refers to teachers' verbal or non-verbal actions that reward and recognize students' efforts, thereby promoting positive attitudes and sustained motivation (Manurung, Junita, & Anjar, 2025; Abbasi, Ghanbari, & Zare, 2024).

Verbal reinforcement, in particular, plays a central role in EFL learning because it directly connects teacher feedback with students' emotions, self-concept, and sense of competence. Although Skinner (1953) and Bandura (1977) provided early behavioral explanations of reinforcement, recent scholarship has redefined reinforcement as not merely conditioning behavior but as a motivational pedagogy that shapes learners' beliefs, emotions, and engagement (Ushioda, 2016; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Ramadhani, Abduh, & Halim, 2025). Within language education, verbal reinforcement functions as affective feedback that bridges teacher intention

and student motivation, guiding both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning.

New perspectives have expanded these classical ideas by showing how reinforcement influences motivation through the fulfillment of psychological needs. Based on Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wang, Gong, Xu, & Hu, 2025), verbal reinforcement is most effective when it satisfies students' needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy. When teachers provide supportive comments or praise, learners feel more capable, valued, and willing to participate in class activities. Similarly, Control-Value Theory (Pekrun, 2024) emphasizes that teacher feedback shapes learners' perceptions of control over learning and the value they attach to tasks. These perceptions generate positive emotions such as enjoyment, pride, and interest, which help sustain engagement. Together, these theories complement Bandura's and Skinner's perspectives by highlighting that the manner in which verbal reinforcement is delivered and how it is perceived plays a central role in supporting motivation and meaningful learning. Expressions such as "Good job," "You're improving," or "That's a creative idea" not only acknowledge performance but also foster emotional security, self-confidence, and persistence in the learning process (Syafitri & Khairunnisa, 2024; Meizy, Suharjito, & Rofiq, 2024).

Learning English as a foreign language can be particularly challenging for Indonesian students, who often experience anxiety, shyness, or fear of making mistakes when speaking. These emotions are intensified by classroom traditions that value correctness and teacher authority over interaction and student expression. In such contexts, supportive verbal reinforcement becomes essential in reducing anxiety and promoting a more positive learning atmosphere (Kolo & Kamlasi, 2022; Mayada & Addinna, 2025). Encouragement, praise, and constructive feedback help students feel accepted and capable, motivating them to engage more actively. As Dörnyei (2001) and Ryan and Deci (2000) assert, motivation is a crucial determinant of success in second and foreign language learning because it drives learners' effort, persistence, and achievement. Consistent and meaningful reinforcement therefore enhances students' intrinsic motivation, leading to deeper engagement in learning English (Abbasi et al., 2024; Ramadhan et al., 2025).

Recent studies have provided further evidence of this effect. For example, Syafitri and Khairunnisa (2024) found that teacher praise and feedback significantly boosted Indonesian EFL learners' motivation and classroom participation. Similarly, Rahmat (2023) reported that verbal feedback including praise, clarification, and repetition encouraged students' active involvement in English classroom interaction. Meizy et al. (2024) also found that both verbal and non-verbal reinforcement made students feel appreciated, motivated, and emotionally secure. However, despite these insights, there remains a lack of research examining the specific impact of teachers' verbal reinforcement on students' motivation in junior high school face-to-face EFL classrooms in Indonesia.

Addressing this gap, the present study explores how teachers' verbal reinforcement fosters students' motivation to learn English in Indonesian junior high school classrooms. By analyzing classroom observations and interviews, this research investigates not only the forms and functions of reinforcement but also its affective and pedagogical significance. The study contributes to motivational pedagogy by illustrating how teachers' authentic, context-sensitive verbal interactions can strengthen students' emotional engagement, confidence, and autonomy in English language learning.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to explore how teachers' verbal reinforcement impacts students' motivation to learn English. The qualitative approach was chosen to obtain rich, detailed insights into the classroom practices and experiences of both teachers and students. According to Indriani and Mulyana (2021), descriptive qualitative research focuses on describing phenomena as they occur naturally, without manipulation of variables. In this study, the researcher served as the primary instrument for observing, recording, and interpreting the use of verbal reinforcement during English teaching and learning activities.

Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted at SMPN 40 Makassar, located on Jln. Aroeppala No. 4, Gunung Sari, during the 2025 academic year. Participants included three English teachers and seven eighth-grade students selected through purposive sampling. This sampling technique was used to choose participants who could provide relevant and detailed information about verbal reinforcement practices and their effects on motivation.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through three main techniques: observation, interview, and documentation.

- a) Observation: Six classroom observations were conducted between July and August 2025 to record how teachers used verbal reinforcement during English lessons. Both structured checklists and narrative field notes were used to document real-time examples of praise, affirmation, positive feedback, and use of names.
- b) Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the three English teachers and seven students to explore their perceptions of how verbal reinforcement influenced motivation. Teacher interviews lasted

approximately 30 minutes each, while student interviews lasted about 20–25 minutes.

- c) Documentation: Supporting materials such as lesson plans, attendance lists, and photographs were collected to strengthen and verify the observation and interview data.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of three steps:

- a) Data Reduction: summarizing and selecting essential information relevant to the research focus.
- b) Data Display: organizing data in descriptive and thematic form to facilitate interpretation.
- c) Conclusion Drawing and Verification: identifying recurring patterns and confirming findings through data triangulation.

To ensure credibility, the researcher applied data triangulation by cross-checking observation results with interview responses and documentation records.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study examined how teachers' verbal reinforcement impacts students' motivation to learn English at SMPN 40 Makassar. Data obtained from classroom observations, teacher and student interviews, and documentation revealed that verbal reinforcement played a crucial role in shaping students' learning behavior and enthusiasm. Four main forms of verbal reinforcement were consistently identified: praise, affirmation, positive feedback, and using students' names. Each contributed differently to increasing motivation, confidence, and engagement.

Table 1. Summary of Teachers' Verbal Reinforcement Observed in English Classroom at SMPN 40 Makassar

Form of Reinforcement	Example Utterances (Observed)	Observed Frequency (6 Lessons)	Typical Reaction / Context	Student
Praise	"Good job!", "Excellent answer!", "Nice try!"	28 instances (avg. 4–6 per lesson)	Students nodded, volunteered immediately after receiving praise, especially during	smiled, or or more answers

Affirmation	<p>“You’re improving,”</p> <p>“That’s a creative idea,”</p> <p>I appreciate your effort.”</p>	18 instances	speaking drills. Targeted at hesitant or lower-achieving students; increased willingness to participate and visible reduction in anxiety.
Positive Feedback	<p>“Great start, now improve your pronunciation,”</p> <p>“Nice sentence – add more details.”</p>	15 instances	Students revised answers or notes; demonstrated motivation to improve and deeper task engagement.
Personalization	<p>“Excellent answer, Rina,”</p> <p>“Good effort, Andi.”</p>	12 instances	Created a sense of belonging and recognition; students showed pride and closer attention during personalized reinforcement.

Shows that praise was the most frequently used form of verbal reinforcement, appearing an average of four to six times per lesson. Teachers often used short, positive phrases such as “Good job!” and “Excellent answer!” to acknowledge students’ correct responses and maintain classroom engagement. Affirmation ranked second in frequency and was commonly directed toward hesitant or lower-achieving students to encourage persistence and reduce anxiety. Positive feedback combined praise with constructive suggestions, helping students identify areas for improvement while staying motivated. Finally, the use of students’ names personalized reinforcement, making recognition more meaningful and fostering a stronger sense of belonging. Overall, the observation results indicate that teachers at SMPN 40 Makassar consistently applied various forms of verbal reinforcement to create a supportive learning atmosphere and sustain students’ motivation in learning English.

Praise as Immediate Motivation

Praise emerged as the most frequently used and most immediate form of verbal reinforcement in the observed English classrooms. All three teachers (T1, T2,

and T3) consistently employed expressions such as “Good job,” “Excellent answer,” “Nice try,” and “Well done” immediately after students’ correct or attempted responses. These phrases were used both to acknowledge correct answers and to appreciate the effort made by students, regardless of the outcome. The frequent use of praise created a positive classroom atmosphere where students felt that their participation and progress were valued by the teacher.

During Observation 2 (July 25, 2025), for instance, T1 praised S3 after a hesitant response by saying, *“Good job your pronunciation is getting clearer.”* The student smiled and volunteered again in the next activity, demonstrating how immediate praise encouraged a visible increase in participation and confidence. A similar pattern was noted during Observation 4 (July 28, 2025), when T3 said, *“That’s an excellent answer, keep it up,”* after a group activity. The compliment was followed by more students raising their hands to contribute, showing that praise acted as a powerful stimulus for classroom engagement.

Students also acknowledged that teacher praise had a meaningful emotional impact on their willingness to participate. As S4 (Interview, August 2, 2025) expressed, *“When my teacher praises me, I feel confident to answer more, even if I’m not sure.”* This response reflected that praise reduced anxiety and encouraged risk-taking among learners, especially those who were initially reluctant to speak in English. The student’s comment highlights how verbal encouragement from the teacher built a sense of trust and safety, making learners more comfortable expressing themselves.

Observational data further revealed that classrooms with higher frequencies of praise exhibited increased student involvement, fewer pauses during discussions, and reduced hesitation when answering questions. Teachers often used praise strategically not only for correct answers but also to maintain attention and momentum during challenging lessons. For example, in Observation 5 (July 30, 2025), T2 praised a group presentation with *“Well done, everyone. You spoke clearly and confidently.”* The reinforcement prompted applause from peers, contributing to a more enthusiastic and supportive learning atmosphere.

In addition, praise was often paired with nonverbal cues such as smiling, nodding, or clapping, further enhancing its motivational effect. These gestures amplified the sincerity of the teacher’s words and made the reinforcement feel more personal and genuine. The combination of verbal and nonverbal praise helped sustain students’ enthusiasm throughout the lesson, even when the material was complex or demanding.

Overall, the findings suggest that praise served not only as a form of positive reinforcement but also as an essential classroom management strategy. It fostered a sense of achievement, strengthened teacher-student rapport, and motivated students to remain engaged. Frequent and sincere praise encouraged learners to take initiative, participate voluntarily, and persist through difficulties, thereby promoting both confidence and active learning in English language classrooms.

Affirmation as Confidence Building

Affirmation emerged as another frequently observed form of verbal reinforcement that played a vital role in encouraging students to persist and gain confidence in learning English. Unlike praise, which was typically used to celebrate correct answers or visible success, affirmation focused on recognizing students' ongoing efforts, perseverance, and creative attempts regardless of accuracy. Teachers often employed expressions such as "You're improving," "That's a creative idea," "I appreciate your effort," and "That's okay, keep going." These affirmations emphasized progress over perfection and helped sustain motivation, particularly among students who were hesitant or less confident in using English.

During Observation 3 (July 23, 2025), T2 demonstrated this approach when a student hesitated while answering a grammar question. Instead of immediately correcting the mistake, the teacher smiled and said, "*That's a good start you're on the right track.*" The student responded positively, continuing the sentence and eventually producing the correct answer. The tone of the teacher's response conveyed patience and reassurance, which encouraged the student to persist rather than withdraw. Similarly, during Observation 4 (July 28, 2025), T2 affirmed a group presentation by saying, "*I can see you worked hard on this dialogue,*" even though minor grammatical errors were present. The students nodded and smiled, reflecting their appreciation of being recognized for effort rather than criticized for mistakes.

Affirmation was also observed to be particularly effective with quieter or lower-achieving students. These learners tended to become more active after receiving encouragement from their teacher. For example, during Observation 6 (August 4, 2025), when a student struggled with pronunciation, T3 calmly responded, "*Good try, you're getting better. Let's practice that word together.*" This collaborative and supportive tone created a positive emotional climate in the classroom. Students who received such affirmations appeared more willing to continue practicing rather than feeling embarrassed by errors.

The interviews further confirmed the strong motivational influence of affirmation. S6 (Interview, August 12, 2025) stated, "*My teacher says, 'That's okay, keep going,' when I make mistakes. It makes me feel encouraged instead of embarrassed.*" This response illustrates that affirming feedback helped students overcome fear of failure and develop resilience. Similarly, another student expressed that when the teacher said "*I know you can do it,*" they felt motivated to try again even after making mistakes. These remarks demonstrate that affirmation not only built students' self-confidence but also nurtured a sense of emotional safety in the classroom.

Across multiple observations, affirmations were most often delivered during speaking and writing activities tasks that naturally involved risk-taking and potential errors. Teachers used affirmations as a way to sustain engagement and prevent students from losing interest when faced with challenges. Moreover, affirmations frequently appeared after incomplete or partially correct responses,

indicating that teachers intentionally used this strategy to maintain student participation and morale.

Overall, the use of affirmations proved instrumental in building students' confidence and persistence in learning English. By recognizing effort and improvement rather than solely accuracy, teachers conveyed that learning is a process that values growth. This approach reduced anxiety, strengthened teacher-student relationships, and encouraged students to take linguistic risks essential for language development. In this way, affirmation functioned not only as positive reinforcement but also as an emotional support mechanism that empowered learners to continue striving toward progress.

Positive Feedback as Constructive Motivation

Positive feedback was another significant form of verbal reinforcement observed in the English classrooms, serving as a bridge between encouragement and correction. Unlike simple praise, positive feedback combined recognition of what students had done well with specific suggestions for improvement. This balanced approach allowed students to feel appreciated for their performance while also understanding how to enhance it. Teachers frequently used comments such as "*Great start, now improve this part,*" "*Nice sentence add more details,*" and "*Good teamwork, but try speaking louder.*" Through these remarks, feedback became both motivational and instructional, reinforcing effort while guiding learners toward progress.

During Observation 2 (July 21, 2025), T3 provided feedback to a student who presented a descriptive text orally: "*Good effort, your idea is clear. Let's try to pronounce 'beautiful' more correctly.*" Instead of focusing on the mistake, the teacher emphasized what the student had done successfully and offered gentle guidance for improvement. The student responded positively, repeated the pronunciation, and smiled after getting it right. The teacher's constructive tone helped maintain the student's confidence while encouraging correction. Similarly, during Observation 5 (July 30, 2025), T3 praised a student's well-organized writing with, "*Your sentences are good; now can you describe the place in more detail?*" The student immediately added a few more descriptive phrases, showing that positive feedback promoted self-correction and deeper engagement with the task.

Observation notes showed that teachers consistently used positive feedback during activities requiring extended responses such as speaking presentations, pair work, and writing exercises. This type of reinforcement was most common when students demonstrated partial understanding or when their work needed refinement rather than complete revision. By combining acknowledgment with direction, teachers managed to sustain motivation even while addressing weaknesses. Instead of perceiving feedback as criticism, students appeared to interpret it as personal coaching or support.

The interview data further emphasized the motivational impact of constructive feedback. S3 (Interview, August 12, 2025) mentioned, "*When my teacher says I'm improving in speaking, I want to keep practicing at home so she'll say that again.*" This shows that students viewed feedback not just as evaluation but as an incentive to continue learning. Positive comments that highlighted growth such as "You're improving" or "You're getting better" acted as reinforcers that sustained students' motivation beyond the classroom. Similarly, another student described feeling more "motivated to fix mistakes" when feedback was delivered with encouragement rather than judgment.

In addition, teachers often used positive tone, smiles, and open gestures while giving feedback, making the interaction feel friendly and supportive. For instance, during Observation 6 (August 4, 2025), when a student struggled with fluency in a dialogue, T3 said, "*Good teamwork, but speak a little louder so everyone can hear you.*" The student immediately adjusted and continued more confidently. This pattern revealed that tone and delivery were crucial in ensuring feedback was perceived as supportive rather than corrective.

Overall, positive feedback played a dual role: it functioned as reinforcement that validated students' efforts and as guidance that directed them toward improvement. This approach promoted self-reflection, perseverance, and intrinsic motivation. Students felt that their progress was acknowledged, and the constructive advice gave them a clear sense of how to develop further. Therefore, positive feedback not only enhanced academic performance but also strengthened emotional engagement in the English learning process. It encouraged learners to embrace mistakes as learning opportunities and to view improvement as a rewarding and ongoing journey.

Using Names (Personalization as Individual Recognition)

The final form of verbal reinforcement frequently observed in the classroom was the use of students' names when giving praise, affirmation, or feedback. This personalized approach made reinforcement more meaningful and direct, as it showed that the teacher's comments were addressed specifically to the individual rather than to the class in general. Teachers consistently used students' names to highlight their performance, effort, or improvement, employing expressions such as "*Excellent answer, Andi,*" "*Good effort, Siti,*" and "*Nice try, Rina.*" The use of names not only drew the student's attention but also conveyed respect and recognition, signaling that the teacher noticed their individual contributions.

During Observation 1 (July 16, 2025), T1 praised a student by saying, "*Good answer, Andi,*" after he successfully responded to a vocabulary question. The moment was followed by laughter and smiles from peers, creating a warm and supportive atmosphere that encouraged others to participate. Similarly, in Observation 5 (July 30, 2025), T2 encouraged a group presentation by saying, "*Great teamwork, Alif and Anisa, you explained the dialogue clearly.*" Both students smiled and

appeared more confident afterward, suggesting that being addressed by name increased their sense of value and belonging.

Observation notes revealed that the use of names was not limited to praise but was also applied during constructive feedback and affirmations. For example, when T3 noticed a student's pronunciation error, she said, *"That's a good effort, Rani try saying it again slowly."* This gentle, personalized correction helped the student focus on improvement without feeling embarrassed. The teacher's tone and use of the student's name personalized the moment, making it feel like individual guidance rather than public correction.

Interviews further confirmed that students perceived this personal recognition as highly motivating. S1 (Interview, August 12, 2025) shared, *"Sometimes my teacher says, 'Good job, Siti.' It feels special, like the praise is really for me, not for the whole class."* Similarly, S7 stated, *"When my name is mentioned, I feel like the teacher is paying attention to me. It makes me want to answer more questions."* These responses indicate that using students' names fulfilled their emotional need for acknowledgment and helped them feel noticed and respected as individuals.

The data also showed that this personalized reinforcement contributed to a positive teacher-student relationship. By using names frequently and sincerely, teachers fostered a sense of closeness and mutual respect. Students became more attentive during lessons and were more likely to respond to teachers' prompts or questions. In addition, the use of names encouraged peer recognition when one student was praised by name, others were motivated to perform better in hopes of receiving similar acknowledgment.

Overall, personalization through the use of names functioned as an important motivational tool in the English classroom. It strengthened emotional bonds between teachers and students, reinforced a sense of belonging, and increased individual engagement. Being addressed personally made students feel valued and visible, transforming routine reinforcement into a meaningful and empowering experience. Consequently, the consistent use of students' names not only supported language learning participation but also contributed to a positive and inclusive classroom culture.

Discussion

The findings confirm that teachers' verbal reinforcement plays a vital role in enhancing student motivation in EFL contexts. This section interprets the results through theoretical frameworks and situates them within the broader research landscape.

Reinforcement as Behavioral Motivation

These findings resonate with Skinner's (1953) assertion that reinforcement strengthens stimulus-response connections, thereby increasing the likelihood of behavioral recurrence. In this study, consistent verbal praise provided by the

teacher reinforced students' active participation, leading to noticeable improvements in classroom interaction. Students who were previously passive or reluctant to speak demonstrated greater enthusiasm and responsiveness after receiving positive reinforcement. This suggests that verbal reinforcement does not merely reward correct answers but also acknowledges students' effort, courage, and willingness to participate, which are essential components of language learning.

The results of this study also corroborate previous empirical research highlighting the effectiveness of verbal reinforcement in enhancing student motivation. Mas'ud (2020) found that timely and meaningful praise significantly increased students' engagement levels, particularly in language classrooms where anxiety and self-doubt often hinder participation. Similarly, Frahesti (2019) reported that verbal rewards reduced student passivity and fostered a more supportive learning environment. The present study extends these findings by demonstrating that verbal reinforcement, when delivered consistently and contextually, can function as a powerful motivational tool in EFL classrooms, especially within the Indonesian educational context.

Moreover, verbal reinforcement contributes to the development of a positive classroom climate, where students feel appreciated and valued. In such an environment, learners perceive the teacher not only as an authority figure but also as a source of encouragement and support. This relational aspect is particularly important in EFL settings, where students' emotional readiness often determines their willingness to use the target language. The teacher's praise signals acceptance and recognition, which in turn enhances students' sense of belonging and intrinsic motivation to learn English.

However, while reinforcement theory emphasizes external motivation, its effectiveness in language learning depends on how praise is administered. Generic or excessive praise may lose its motivational impact, whereas specific and task-related praise tends to be more effective. In this study, praise that directly acknowledged students' linguistic effort such as correct pronunciation, meaningful responses, or attempts to use new vocabulary proved more influential in sustaining engagement. This finding aligns with contemporary pedagogical perspectives that advocate for purposeful and authentic reinforcement rather than mechanical or superficial praise.

Additionally, verbal reinforcement can serve as a bridge between behavioral and socio-cognitive approaches to motivation. Although rooted in behaviorism, praise also influences learners' self-perception and self-efficacy. Repeated exposure to positive verbal reinforcement helps students internalize a sense of competence, which gradually transforms extrinsic motivation into more intrinsic forms of motivation. Over time, students may participate not solely for praise but because they develop confidence and enjoyment in using the English language.

In the Indonesian EFL classroom context, where students often exhibit high levels of reticence due to cultural norms and fear of negative evaluation, teachers' verbal reinforcement becomes particularly significant.

Affirmation and the Growth Mindset

Teacher affirmation plays a pivotal role in shaping students' motivational orientation, particularly when viewed through the lens of Dweck's (2006) growth mindset theory. Unlike traditional feedback that prioritizes correctness or final outcomes, affirmation emphasizes students' effort, persistence, and learning process. In the EFL classroom context, such affirming verbal reinforcement encourages learners to perceive language ability as a developable skill rather than a fixed trait. This perspective is especially important for students who struggle academically, as it fosters resilience and sustains motivation despite repeated challenges.

The findings of this study indicate that teachers' affirming statements such as acknowledging students' attempts, praising perseverance, or validating partial understanding contribute significantly to the cultivation of a growth mindset. When teachers emphasize effort over accuracy, students are less likely to interpret mistakes as indicators of failure. Instead, errors are reframed as natural and valuable components of the learning process. This aligns closely with Dweck's (2006) assertion that learners who adopt a growth mindset are more willing to embrace challenges, persist in the face of difficulties, and view setbacks as opportunities for improvement.

In particular, affirmation was found to be highly beneficial for lower-performing students, who often experience heightened anxiety and diminished self-confidence in EFL settings. Affirming reinforcement helped these learners develop emotional resilience, enabling them to remain engaged even when they encountered linguistic difficulties. Rather than withdrawing from classroom interaction, students who received consistent affirmation demonstrated increased willingness to participate and express their ideas in English. This finding parallels the work of Islam and Hossain (2024), who reported that teacher encouragement plays a crucial role in reducing language anxiety and promoting sustained effort among EFL learners.

Moreover, affirmation contributes to a supportive classroom environment in which students feel psychologically safe to experiment with language use. In such an environment, learners are more inclined to take risks, such as attempting unfamiliar vocabulary or complex sentence structures, without fear of ridicule or negative evaluation. Aulia and Jamilah (2024) similarly observed that students exposed to affirming reinforcement developed more positive attitudes toward error correction and linguistic risk-taking. The present study extends this insight by demonstrating that affirmation not only influences learners' emotional states but also reshapes their cognitive beliefs about learning and improvement.

Affirmation also serves as a mediating factor between teacher feedback and student self-efficacy. When teachers explicitly recognize effort, students begin to associate success with controllable factors, such as practice and persistence, rather than innate ability. Over time, this attributional shift enhances students' belief in their capacity to improve, which is a core component of growth mindset development. In the context of EFL learning, where progress is often gradual and non-linear, such beliefs are essential for maintaining long-term motivation.

Furthermore, the role of affirmation extends beyond individual learners to influence overall classroom dynamics. As students observe peers being affirmed for effort and improvement, a collective norm is established that values learning processes over perfection. This shared mindset reduces competitive pressure and fosters collaborative learning, as students become more willing to support one another. In Indonesian EFL classrooms, where cultural norms may discourage speaking out or making mistakes publicly, affirmation can counteract these tendencies by normalizing struggle and effort as integral to learning.

Despite its benefits, the effectiveness of affirmation depends largely on its authenticity and relevance. Affirmation that is vague or excessive may fail to convey meaningful support, whereas specific and context-sensitive affirmation tends to have a stronger motivational impact. In this study, affirmations that directly addressed students' strategies, improvement, or perseverance were particularly effective in reinforcing a growth-oriented mindset. This finding underscores the importance of deliberate and reflective use of affirming language in pedagogical practice.

Positive Feedback for Competence Development

Positive feedback that integrates praise with constructive guidance plays a fundamental role in supporting students' competence development and fostering self-regulated learning in EFL classrooms. Rather than merely affirming students' performance, effective feedback provides learners with clear information about their progress and actionable directions for improvement. The findings of this study indicate that feedback combining encouragement with specific instructional guidance enhances students' understanding of learning goals while simultaneously sustaining their motivation. This approach aligns closely with Hattie and Timperley's (2007) feedback model, which emphasizes the significance of goal-oriented and meaningful feedback in promoting deep learning.

According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), effective feedback should address three essential questions: where the learner is going, how the learner is going, and what the next steps are. In this study, teachers' feedback often fulfilled these criteria by acknowledging students' efforts and achievements while offering suggestions for refinement. For instance, students were praised for attempting to express ideas in English and then guided on how to improve accuracy, fluency, or organization.

Such feedback enabled learners to recognize both their strengths and areas for growth, thereby supporting a balanced perception of their competence.

The integration of praise and guidance also contributed to the development of self-regulated learning skills. When feedback provided explicit cues on how to improve, students became more aware of their learning strategies and performance standards. This awareness encouraged them to monitor their progress, set realistic goals, and adjust their learning approaches accordingly. As a result, students were not merely passive recipients of teacher input but active participants in their own learning process. This finding underscores the role of feedback as a formative tool that empowers learners to take responsibility for their language development.

Furthermore, the observed outcomes resonate with the findings of Wang et al. (2024), who demonstrated that autonomy-supportive feedback enhances intrinsic motivation by fulfilling students' psychological needs for competence and self-direction. In the present study, feedback that was perceived as supportive rather than evaluative fostered a sense of autonomy among learners. Students felt that their efforts were valued and that they were trusted to improve through guided practice. This perception encouraged intrinsic engagement, as students became motivated by personal progress rather than external rewards alone.

In the Indonesian EFL classroom context, where teacher-centered instruction has traditionally been dominant, the shift toward feedback that is dialogic and supportive represents a meaningful pedagogical transformation. Students' perceptions of feedback as caring and encouraging indicate a movement away from authoritative correction toward a more collaborative learning relationship. Instead of viewing feedback as judgment, learners interpreted it as assistance aimed at helping them succeed. This relational dimension of feedback is particularly important in language learning, as emotional safety and trust significantly influence students' willingness to participate and take risks.

Moreover, positive feedback contributed to the development of learners' confidence in using English. By highlighting what students did well before addressing areas for improvement, teachers reduced the threat associated with corrective feedback. This sequencing allowed students to remain receptive to suggestions without feeling discouraged. Over time, repeated exposure to supportive feedback helped learners internalize standards of quality and improvement, reinforcing their belief in their ability to achieve communicative competence.

The dialogic nature of feedback observed in this study also reflects principles of learner-centered pedagogy. Teachers often invited students to reflect on their performance or respond to feedback, creating opportunities for interaction and mutual understanding. Such practices align with contemporary educational perspectives that view feedback as a two-way process rather than a one-directional transmission of information. Through dialogue, students gain clarity about

expectations and develop metacognitive awareness, both of which are essential for effective language learning.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of positive feedback depends on its clarity, specificity, and consistency. Feedback that is overly general or lacks actionable guidance may fail to support competence development. In this study, feedback that clearly linked praise to specific behaviors and provided concrete suggestions for improvement proved most effective. This highlights the importance of teacher expertise in delivering feedback that is both motivating and instructional.

Personalization and Emotional Relatedness

Personalized verbal reinforcement, particularly through the intentional use of students' names and individualized acknowledgment, plays a significant role in fostering emotional relatedness in the EFL classroom. This practice closely aligns with Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, which identifies relatedness as one of the three fundamental psychological needs essential for sustaining intrinsic motivation. In this study, teachers' personalized reinforcement strategies contributed to students' feelings of being recognized, valued, and emotionally connected within the learning environment, thereby enhancing their motivation and classroom engagement.

The use of students' names during praise, feedback, or encouragement functioned as more than a simple classroom management technique. It served as a symbolic marker of personal recognition that affirmed students' presence and contributions. When learners heard their names associated with positive reinforcement, they perceived the interaction as meaningful and genuine. This sense of personal validation strengthened emotional bonds between teachers and students, reinforcing the feeling that the classroom was a supportive and inclusive space for learning. Such emotional connectedness is particularly important in EFL contexts, where students often experience anxiety and insecurity when using a foreign language.

These findings are consistent with the work of Scales and Roehlkepartain (2020), who demonstrated that strong teacher-student relationships are reliable predictors of increased student motivation, engagement, and participation. In the present study, students who experienced personalized reinforcement were more willing to contribute to discussions, respond to questions, and attempt to use English in communicative tasks. This suggests that emotional relatedness, cultivated through personalized verbal reinforcement, serves as a foundational condition for active language use and meaningful interaction.

Furthermore, personalization in reinforcement contributes to the development of trust within the classroom. When teachers consistently acknowledge students as individuals rather than anonymous members of a group, learners are more likely to interpret teacher feedback as caring and supportive. This perception fosters relational trust, which in turn lowers affective barriers to learning. Husain et al.

(2024) similarly found that emotionally supportive communication strengthens trust and encourages students to take linguistic risks, such as experimenting with new vocabulary or complex grammatical structures. The present study reinforces this conclusion by highlighting how personalized reinforcement can reduce fear of negative evaluation and promote exploratory language use.

In addition, personalized verbal reinforcement supports students' emotional well-being by addressing their need for belonging. According to Self-Determination Theory, relatedness refers to the experience of mutual care and connectedness with others. In this study, the teacher's use of students' names, along with personalized comments, conveyed attentiveness and empathy. Students reported feeling more comfortable and confident in participating when they sensed that the teacher genuinely cared about their learning progress. This emotional safety is crucial in language learning, as it enables students to engage more freely without the constant fear of making mistakes.

The impact of personalization was particularly evident among students who were initially reluctant to participate. For these learners, being personally addressed by the teacher functioned as an invitation to engage rather than a demand to perform. Over time, repeated experiences of personalized encouragement helped these students build confidence and gradually increase their participation. This finding underscores the role of emotional relatedness in supporting equitable participation, as personalization can help mitigate the marginalization of quieter or lower-proficiency learners.

Moreover, personalized reinforcement aligns with learner-centered pedagogical approaches that emphasize responsiveness to individual needs. By tailoring verbal reinforcement to specific students, teachers demonstrated awareness of learners' identities, abilities, and emotional states. This individualized attention not only enhanced motivation but also contributed to a more humane and responsive teaching practice. In contrast to impersonal or standardized feedback, personalized reinforcement communicated respect and appreciation for students' unique efforts and contributions.

Integrative Interpretation and Pedagogical Implications

From a behavioral perspective, verbal reinforcement encourages the repetition of desirable learning behaviors, such as active participation, persistence, and willingness to use the target language. At the same time, its emotional dimension supports learners' psychological needs by promoting feelings of recognition, safety, and belonging. This dual function suggests that effective verbal reinforcement transcends simplistic reward-based approaches and aligns more closely with learner-centered and motivationally informed pedagogies. In such environments, students do not merely respond to praise but internalize positive learning dispositions that support long-term engagement with language learning.

The integrative interpretation of these findings underscores the importance of teacher intentionality in delivering verbal reinforcement. Teachers who thoughtfully balance praise with constructive feedback are more likely to enhance students' perceived competence while maintaining instructional rigor. Praise that is accompanied by meaningful guidance helps students understand what they have done well and how they can improve further. In contrast, overgeneralized or excessive compliments may reduce the instructional value of feedback and diminish its motivational impact. Therefore, verbal reinforcement should be specific, contextually relevant, and aligned with clear learning objectives.

Personalization also emerged as a key element in maximizing the effectiveness of verbal reinforcement. When teachers tailor their reinforcement to individual learners by acknowledging effort, progress, or specific strategies they strengthen teacher-student relationships and promote emotional relatedness. Such personalized interactions foster trust and encourage students to take linguistic risks without fear of negative evaluation. This relational dimension is particularly crucial in EFL classrooms, where anxiety and low self-confidence often inhibit participation. Consequently, reinforcement practices should be inclusive and equitable, ensuring that all students receive recognition and support.

These findings carry important implications for teacher professional development. Training programs should move beyond technical aspects of language instruction to include explicit guidance on motivational communication and feedback strategies. Teachers need opportunities to reflect on how their verbal practices influence students' motivation, emotions, and self-regulation. Professional development initiatives should emphasize the importance of adapting reinforcement to learners' developmental stages, proficiency levels, and emotional needs. As Bhatti (2021) argues, verbal reinforcement must be dynamic and responsive to learner progress rather than implemented as fixed or routine expressions.

Furthermore, integrating verbal reinforcement into reflective teaching practices can enhance its effectiveness. Teachers who regularly evaluate their reinforcement strategies are better positioned to adjust their approaches based on students' responses and learning trajectories. Such reflective practice supports continuous improvement and aligns with contemporary views of teaching as an adaptive and relational profession.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how teachers' verbal reinforcement fosters students' motivation in an Indonesian EFL classroom. The findings revealed that four main forms of reinforcement praise, affirmation, positive feedback, and personalization through the use of names played complementary roles in supporting students' engagement and confidence in learning English. Praise emerged as the most immediate motivator, stimulating students to participate actively and respond

without hesitation. Affirmation built emotional security by valuing effort and persistence, helping students overcome fear of making mistakes. Positive feedback provided constructive guidance that encouraged self-reflection and continuous improvement, while personalization strengthened the teacher-student relationship and fostered a sense of belonging.

Together, these forms of reinforcement contributed to both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. They not only encouraged students to perform well but also helped them internalize positive attitudes toward learning. The findings support key motivational theories proposed by Skinner (1953), Bandura (1977), Dörnyei (2001), and Deci and Ryan (2000), which highlight that positive reinforcement and supportive teacher communication can significantly influence learners' behavior and emotional engagement. Overall, the study concludes that effective verbal reinforcement when delivered sincerely, consistently, and personally creates a classroom atmosphere that nurtures confidence, persistence, and enthusiasm for learning English. Motivation, therefore, is not solely a student's internal drive but also a reflection of the quality of teacher-student interaction within the learning environment.

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