To: The Principal
From: Ms L.P.Wong

Action research

Title: Can the use of positive reinforcement enhance students’ motivation in learning English?
**Introduction:**

In Hong Kong, many students find it difficult to learn English as English is their second language. The fact is that they may not have the intrinsic motivation to learn English. Even worse, some teachers pay increasingly greater attention to undesirable behaviour and less attention to desirable behaviour. The punishment of students causes undesirable behaviour to cease in the short run but occur more frequently in the long run. Therefore, there is one question that comes to my mind: What should teachers do to arouse students’ motivation in learning English? Undesirable behaviour can then be avoided. I decided to make use of action research. Kurt Lewin (1946) suggested four important processes for the spiral investigation approach: (1) planning for improvement, (2) carrying out the plan, (3) observing the effects of the plan and (4) making professional reflection for further planning.

**Plan:**

The target of my action research is students from the second group of 1C. At the beginning of the first term, some students were in lack of initiative and motivation in learning English. They had short attention span and the English learning atmosphere among students was quite weak. Thus, the problem statement of the research is “Students lack intrinsic motivation in learning English”. In order to solve the problem, a research question comes to my mind, “Can the use of positive reinforcement enhance students’ motivation in learning English?”. According to Skinner (1968), ‘positive reinforcement’ means that the frequency of desired behaviour increases because it is followed by a stimulus like a reward.
**Action:**

The research was carried out from September, 2006 to June, 2007.

(1) I encouraged my target group to raise their hands and answer questions. Undoubtedly, class participation played an important role in making learning English an interesting and happy experience. In each lesson, one student was assigned to give marks for those students who answered the questions correctly. For those students who accumulated enough marks would receive rewards like candies or souvenirs.

(2) I would offer frequent praise to students if they answered questions correctly. Praise was such a valuable motivator. In order to encourage some under-achievers, I always said, “Good try!” despite their wrong answers.

(3) There would be a competition if students finished some required tasks on grammar items. Students were divided into two groups. I asked questions from a piece of reading exercise. The one who raised the hand quickly could answer the question. If the answer was correct, his or her group would get marks. I also asked them to come out to dictate some vocabulary items or sentences for revision. Marks would be given to the group who wrote the answers on the blackboard correctly. Small prizes would be given to the group who won.

**Observation:**

After the use of some reinforcers such as candies, praise and small prizes, I discovered that most students were more interested in learning English. They could really enjoy a happy and rich English learning environment.
(1) From class observation, not only the strong students but also some quiet and weak students tried their best to raise their hands more. They even came to the blackboard to make sentences or dictate some words. They were very interested in participating in any class activities. In addition, students were more concentrated in the English lessons. Discipline problems seldom occurred when they were learning English.

(2) From some informal interviews, some students asked me whether I could teach them English in the following academic year as they enjoyed having English lessons very much.

(3) From the questionnaires done by the end of the term, most of the students were very satisfied with learning in the English lessons. One student wrote, “It would be better if Ms Wong can teach us English again in the next academic year.”

(4) Regarding the dictation tests for the continuous assessment, many students got full marks in most of their tests.

**Reflection:**

Although positive reinforcement plays a fundamental role in arousing students’ interests in learning English, there are still some limitations.

(1) From my observation, some wealthier students who had a lot of expensive sweets at home did not find the rewards attractive. So, two questions are raised, “What is the very best reward in this class that I could get for good work and behaviour?” Another question is, “Is adding their conduct marks for active class participation a better alternative?”

(2) Students participated more actively when rewards were given immediately after
the lessons. In other words, they would raise their hands to answer questions less often if their rewards were given after the accumulation of enough marks in their class participation.

(3) Regarding the competitions between two groups, the stronger group always won. The weaker group became less motivated because they could foresee the outcomes.

**Conclusion and Re-plan**

To conclude, I strongly believe that teachers can make use of positive reinforcement to arouse students’ interests in learning English. Through the class observation as well as the data collected from the interviews and questionnaires, students appeared to be more motivated to learn English in the lessons.

I think I will continue to use positive reinforcement to create a happy and active learning environment for students. As there is no one best method in the world, whether the use of positive reinforcement is effective or not depends on individual differences. The earlier rewards given to students leads to more frequent desired behaviour. Also, multiple reinforcers are likely more effective than a single reinforcer.

As for the competitions in the English lessons, I will try to re-allocate students in different groups. High-achievers and low-achievers will be evenly distributed between two different groups. Both groups will have high motivation to win.