

A CASE STUDY ON HOW ENGLISH TEACHERS USE REWARD SYSTEMS TO ENHANCE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

This study investigates how English teachers implement reward systems to enhance student engagement in English language learning. This also aims to explore teachers' use of reward systems, their influence on student engagement, and the challenges of their implementation. A qualitative case study design was used. Data were collected from five English teachers through structured interview responses that were coded and analyzed thematically. The findings show that teachers implemented rewards as a structured classroom routine. Reward types included star stamps, point-based systems, small material prizes, and social/verbal rewards. Rewards were mainly given for active participation, effort and improvement, task completion, peer assistance, cooperation, and speaking attempts. In terms of engagement, rewards were reported to increase students' classroom participation and effort, build confidence-especially among shy learners and reduce fear of making mistakes when speaking or responding. However, several challenges were identified: maintaining consistency, dealing with passive student who were indifferent to rewards, students fatigue due to lesson scheduling, and social-emotional issues such as jealousy and comparison. Some teachers also reported signs of dependency, where students expected rewards and showed reduced motivation when rewards were not provided. To address the challenges, teachers used strategies such as clarifying criteria, using group rewards to reduce competition, differentiating questions for lower-ability students, creating supportive learning environments, and gradually reducing tangible rewards while strengthening verbal encouragement. Overall, the study concludes that rewards systems can support engagement effectively, when applied fairly and transparently when used as bridge toward stronger learning habits rather than as a permanent solution.

Keywords: reward systems, English teaching, student engagement

Introduction

Student engagement becomes important in English language learning because it influences students' consistency in participation, their ability to persist when faced with difficulties, and their willingness to exert effort in various classroom learning activities. In EFL classrooms context, student engagement issues often manifest in simple yet significant ways, such as hesitation to speak, unequal participation among students, and assignment completion driven more by teacher pressure than by students' own initiative. These conditions can be a challenge for English teachers, especially in classes where students are still trying to build their confidence to use English. Therefore, English teachers need learning strategies that can keep students

involved, make them feel safer when using English, and encourage them to take active part in learning process.

One strategy that teachers often use in a classroom is a reward system. In simple terms, rewards are given to students when they show good behavior or making a good effort, such as participation, task completion, improvement, cooperation, or speaking attempts. Rewards may have various forms, including verbal praise, points, stamps, small gifts, certificates, applause, or classroom recognition. Teachers often use rewards because they are easy to apply, practical, and can motivate students during the lesson directly. In language classrooms, especially English classes reward may be particularly relevant because students need extra encouragement to answer questions, try to

speak, and practice more often using the target language.

Previous studies have shown that rewards can support motivation and classroom involvement. Satoto and Subekti (2023), for instance, found that rewards supported learners' engagement in an Indonesian L2 classroom, although they also cautioned that rewards alone may not be sufficient to foster independent learning. This suggests that rewards may be effective for immediate classroom participation, but they need to be designed carefully so that students do not depend only on external reinforcement. Husna and Syahrul (2022) also reported that teacher-provided rewards functioned as reinforcement in English learning and were perceived to increase students' motivation. Similarly, Maizari et al. (2024) found that praise and gifts were viewed by students as motivating factors in learning English, while Duisenova and Zhorabekova (2024) showed that rewards embedded in digital game-based learning increased pupils' motivation and improved EFL learning outcomes.

However, the use of rewards is not straightforward. Rewards may encourage students to participate, but teachers still need to decide what types of rewards are appropriate, how often they should be given, what behaviors should be rewarded, and how fairness should be maintained. Satoto and Subekti (2023) emphasized that teachers need to understand what rewards to use and when and how to deliver them. These issues are important because existing studies often discuss whether rewards can increase motivation or engagement, but fewer studies explain how teachers actually implement reward systems in daily English classroom practice. This is particularly important in EFL classrooms, where engagement involves not only visible participation, but also confidence, willingness to speak, risk-taking, and sustained effort.

The literature also shows that reward systems may create challenges. Some studies support rewards because they can make learning more enjoyable, especially for young learners, and because they can

help students stay active in class. However, other studies warn that rewards may create dependency if students participate only to receive prizes. Cahya et al. (2018), for example, reported that teachers sometimes objected to giving rewards too often because of cost and because students might focus more on gifts than on learning itself. Hoffmann et al. (2009) also highlighted concerns related to fairness, long-term motivation, and the way teachers define and use rewards in classroom settings. The concerns show that reward systems need to be examined not only as motivational tools, but also as classroom practices shaped by teacher decisions, student responses, and contextual constraints.

In this study, rewards are seen from three simple points: reinforcement, motivation, and student engagement. From a reinforcement perspective, rewards can encourage students to repeat positive actions, such as answering questions, completing tasks, cooperating with peers, or trying to speak English. As a motivation perspective, rewards can make students more willing to join activities in the class, although overuse may shift students' focus from learning to prizes. From an engagement perspective, rewards may influence behavioral engagement, such as enjoyment, pride, and confidence; these perspectives are useful because they allow reward systems to be analyzed beyond simple claims that rewards "work" or "do not work."

Based on this background, a qualitative case study is necessary for three reasons. First, student engagement in English learning is context-dependent because classroom culture, learner characteristics, and instructional activities may shape how rewards function. Second, reward systems are not merely objects such as stickers or prizes, but also involve teacher decisions about rules, criteria, timing, consistency, and classroom communication. Third, teachers often face practical challenges, including fairness across students, limited time, cost, student dependency, jealousy,

comparison, and classroom management constraints. Therefore, this study focuses on how English teacher implement reward systems, how these systems influence student engagement, and what challenges teachers encounter during implementation. This study is limited to English teachers teaching at elementary and junior high school levels. The focus is on reward systems used during classroom instruction, rather than rewards used outside formal learning activities. Student engagement in this study includes behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement observed or reported during English lessons. As the study uses a qualitative case study approach, the findings are context-specific and are not intended to be generalized to all educational settings.

This study aims to describe how English teachers implement reward systems in classroom practice, analyze how reward systems influence student engagement in English language learning, and identify the challenges teachers face during implementation. The study is expected to contribute theoretically to the discussion of reward systems and student engagement in EFL classrooms. Practically, the findings may provide English teachers with examples of how rewards can be designed, implemented, and adjusted fairly to support students' participation, confidence, and learning habits. The research is guided by the following questions: (1) How do English teachers implement reward systems in the classroom? (2) How do reward systems influence student engagement in English language learning? And (3) what challenges do English teachers face in implementing reward systems?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a case study design. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to explore and understand in depth how English teachers implemented reward systems in their

classrooms and how these systems were perceived to enhance student engagement. The case study design was appropriate because the research focused on a bounded phenomenon, namely the implementation of reward systems within English language teaching contexts at elementary and junior high school levels. This design also matched the research questions, which emphasized how English teachers used rewards, how students responded, and what challenges during classroom practice.

The participants consisted of five English teachers who taught at elementary and junior high school levels. They were selected using purposive sampling because they met specific criteria relevant to the study. The criteria were: (1) the teachers actively taught English at the elementary and junior high school level, (2) the teachers regularly used reward systems in their English teaching practices, and (3) the teachers were willing to participate in interviews and provide relevant instructional documents. The research setting was schools where English was taught as a foreign language. The setting was selected based on its relevance to the focus of the study and its accessibility for data collection.

The data in this study were qualitative. The main data were taken from interviews with five English teachers. The interviews gave information about the teachers' experiences, views, strategies, student responses, and challenges in using reward systems in English classes. To support the interview results, the researcher also used several teaching documents such as lesson plans; classroom rules, reward records, and other related materials.

The instruments were an interview guide and document analysis framework. The interview guide contained open-ended questions about the types of rewards used by teachers, their reasons for using them, how they applied the rewards, how students responded, and what challenges they faced. The interviews gave the teachers an opportunity to describe how they used

rewards in English classrooms and how students responded to them. Meanwhile, the document analysis framework helped the researcher review teaching documents related to reward practices. Both instrument were prepared to make sure that the collected information matched the research question.

The research was carried out in several steps. First, the researcher prepared the interview guide and document analysis framework. Second, the participants were selected based on the criteria of the study. Third, the researcher collected the data through interviews and document analysis. After the data were collected, the interview results were transcribed and the documents were reviewed carefully. The data were then coded, grouped into categories, and developed into themes based on the research questions.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher identified important information related to reward system implementation, student engagement, and the challenges face by teachers. Similar information was grouped into the same categories to avoid repetition and to make the findings easier to understand. The themes were then interpreted by connecting them with the research questions, relevant theories, and previous studies. This analysis helped the researcher present the finding based on the teachers' experiences and the classroom context.

Several strategies were uses to maintain trustworthiness. Credibility was supported through triangulation by comparing interview findings with instructional documents. Member checking was also conducted by sharing short summaries with participants to confirm whether the meanings of their responses had been interpreted accurately. Transferability was supported by providing clear information about the research setting and participants so that readers could judge whether the findings might be relevant to other contexts. Dependability was maintained by

recording the research steps, including how data were collected and analyzed. Confirmability was supported by basing interpretations on interview and document data to reduce researcher bias.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the research before data collection. Participants' identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms, and confidentiality was maintained. The data collected in this study were used only for academic and research purposes.

Finding and Discussion

the findings are presented and discussed according to the three research questions. Across the five cases, the teachers described reward systems as part of their daily classroom practice. they used rewards to encourage participation, confidence, effort, cooperation, and positive learning habits. Although the forms of rewards varied across participants, the same major themes appeared repeatedly; the types of rewards used, how rewards were implemented, how students responded, and what challenges teachers faced.

a. Teachers' Implementation of Reward Systems in English Classrooms

The findings show that English teachers implemented reward systems as structured instructional routines rather than as random gifts. All participants used rewards, but the forms were not identical. Three teachers relied strongly on visual and countable rewards, especially star and points. These rewards were useful because students could see their progress and understand classroom targets more concretely. Two other teachers combined tangible rewards with social or verbal rewards, such as praise, applause, and classroom recognition. This pattern is consistent with previous studies in EYL and EFL contexts, which report that teachers

often use simple, visible, and low-cost rewards such as stars, stickers, praise, applause, smiles, and teacher signatures (Prawiro & Anggrarini, 2019; Husna & Syahrul, 2022).

The teachers did not give rewards without criteria. Rewards were usually linked to clear classroom behaviors, such as answering questions, asking questions, finishing tasks, helping friends, working together, or trying to speak English. One participant explained that rewards were given mainly for effort and improvement, not only for correct answers. This indicates that the reward system was not only used to recognize achievement, but also to value the learning process. This is pedagogically important because English learners, especially young or beginner learners, may need recognition for trying, not only for producing correct language. When rewards are connected to effort, participation, and progress, they can encourage students to take risks and remain involved in classroom activities.

Timing and visibility also became important elements of implementation. Several teachers gave rewards immediately after students showed desirable behaviors. This immediate feedback helped students understand which behaviors were appreciated. One teacher wrote group names on the board and counted stars together at the end of the lesson, while another teacher explained that students felt more motivated when they could see their stars arranged visibly. This shows that rewards functional not only as prizes, but also as classroom signals. They made expectations concrete and allowed students to monitor their own participation. From a reinforcement perspective, the immediacy of rewards strengthened the connection between student behavior and teacher recognition.

Fairness was another major concern in the implementation of reward systems. Teachers tried to ensure that weaker or quieter students still had opportunities to receive rewards. For example, one participant used a “star-sharing day” and adjusted the level of questions so that lower-ability students could participate successfully. Another participant emphasized that rewards should not be given for every small action because this might encourage students to chase rewards rather than focus on learning. These practices suggest that teachers were aware of the need to balance motivation and fairness. Reward systems were therefore not merely mechanical routines, but involved ongoing teacher judgement.

The implementation pattern in this study supports Hoffmann et al (2009), who argued that more attention needs to be given to teachers’ perspectives on rewards. The present study contributes to that area by showing how teachers make practical decisions about reward types, timing, criteria, and distribution. The findings suggest that reward systems can be understood as a form of classroom scaffolding. Teachers used rewards to help students develop habits such as being active, cooperating, trying, and completing tasks. This is reflected in the view of one participant who stated that rewards are not the final goal, but a bridge to help children become accustomed to positive learning behaviors. Another participant described rewards as temporary scaffolding and intentionally limited material rewards. The following table summarizes the cross-case pattern of reward system implementation across the five participants.

Table 1. Cross-case Summary of
Reward System Implementation

Participant	Main reward type	How it is counted/recorded	Main learning target	Notes
P1	Star stamp (individual + group)	Stars on reward card + group names on board	Participation, behavior, cooperation	Transparent group comparison; focus on habit-building
P2	Star stamp with exchange option	Stars in special student book	Participation + task completion	Stars can be exchanged for stationery or report points
P3	Point-based system + periodic prizes	Extra points for correct/active behavior	Participation + deeper preparation	End-of-period rewards (snacks/stationery)
P4	Prize-based reward (ball prize)	Given when students attempt speaking	Speaking confidence	Accepts mixed English + local language
P5	Mixed rewards (verbal, applause, sticker/stamp)	Selective and transparent	Effort, progress, positive learning behavior	Limits material rewards; emphasizes scaffolding

b. The Influence of Reward Systems on Student Engagement

The influence of reward systems appeared most clearly in behavioral and affective engagement. Teachers consistently reported that rewards encouraged students to participate more actively, volunteer answers, ask questions, complete tasks, and attempt to speak English. Participant 1 stated that students looked happy, proud and appreciated even when the reward was only a star. Some students even showed their stars to friends, suggesting that the reward carried social meaning and recognition. Participant 2 reported that students became very enthusiastic when they had the opportunity to earn stars, and this excitement was followed by visible effort because students immediately searched for answers using dictionaries or printed materials. Participant 3 observed that students became excited and enthusiastic and often asked for more questions or additional opportunities to gain points. Participant 4 reported that students were initially shy, but after receiving prizes repeatedly, they became more confident and started trying to speak English, even when their English was still mixed with local language. Participant 5 also reported that most students responded positively by becoming more confident and engaged, especially shy learners. These findings indicate that rewards helped create participation prompts, especially for students who needed encouragement to begin responding in class.

Behavioral engagement was shown through students' increased participation, quicker task attempts, willingness to answer questions, and active involvement in classroom activities. This finding aligns with Satoto and Subekti (2023), who found that rewards could increase learners' attentiveness and make classroom atmosphere more active and enjoyable. In the present study, teachers described similar classroom changes, such as livelier lessons, stronger excitement, better focus, and improved preparation. These indicators show that rewards supported classroom energy and helped students become more visibly involved in English learning.

Affective engagement was also evident. Teachers reported that students became more enthusiastic, proud, confident, and less afraid of making mistakes. This is especially important in English learning because students often avoid speaking due to fear of embarrassment or incorrect answers. Cahya et al. (2018) similarly found that tangible rewards encouraged students to participate actively and reduced their fear of making mistakes. In this study, several participants observed that rewards helped students try to answer, speak, and participate even when their responses were not fully correct. In this sense, rewards reduced the emotional cost of participation and helped create a more supportive learning atmosphere. Although the data mainly showed behavioral and affective engagement, cognitive engagement also appeared in a more limited but relevant way. Some teachers observed that students tried harder to prepare answers, searched dictionaries, checked printed materials, and paid closer attention when rewards were connected to classroom tasks. These behaviors suggest that rewards may support students' effort and focus during learning activities. However, the evidence for cognitive engagement was

not as strong as the evidence for behavioral and affective engagement. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted carefully: rewards appeared to increase students' visible participation and emotional confidence more clearly than their deeper cognitive involvement.

The findings also show that the influence of rewards was not always stable or entirely positive. Some students began to expect rewards before participating. Participant 1 reported that students sometimes asked whether there would be stars, while Participant 5 observed that a small number of students focused too much on receiving stickers. This suggests that engagement may become conditional when students participate mainly because they expect rewards. This becomes conditional when students participate mainly because they expect rewards. This finding supports Satoto and Subekti's (2023) caution that rewards alone are not sufficient to develop independent learning, especially when students need to sustain effort beyond immediate classroom situations.

The findings therefore suggest that reward systems work best when they are used as confidence triggers and participation prompts, not as permanent sources of motivation. Rewards helped students start acting, speaking, and trying, but they did not automatically create deep internal motivation. Some students remained passive even when rewards were available, and some classes faced fatigue or timing issues. This shows that engagement is shaped by multiple factors, including student characteristics, classroom atmosphere, task design, teacher support, and lesson timing. Rewards appear to be more effective when combined with broader instructional strategies, such as differentiated questioning, supportive feedback, storytelling, contextual

examples, and meaningful classroom tasks.

c. Challenges in Implementing Reward Systems

The teachers faced several challenges in implementing reward systems. These challenges can be grouped into three main areas: sustainability, inclusiveness, and social-emotional side effects. Sustainability refers to the difficulty of maintaining consistency and keeping rewards meaningful over time. Some teachers reported that reward systems required patience and consistency, particularly when working with younger learners. If rewards were used too frequently or predictably, students might begin to expect them as a routine rather than experience them as meaningful recognition. Participant 5 noted that rewards may lose motivational impact when students become too accustomed to them.

This sustainability issue is closely related to reward dependency. Some students showed signs of expecting rewards continuously or becoming disappointed when rewards were not provided. This is a significant concern because reward systems are intended to support engagement, not replace students' internal reasons for learning. Hoffmann et al. (2009) and Satoto and Subekti (2023) both warn that repeated extrinsic reinforcement may affect long-term motivation if students begin to focus more on rewards than learning. In this study, teachers responded to this risk by gradually reducing tangible rewards and strengthening verbal encouragement.

Inclusiveness also emerged as a challenge. Not all students responded to rewards in the same way. Some students remained passive, indifferent, or less motivated even when rewards were offered. This suggests that reward systems may not influence all learners equally. Participant 2 addressed this

issue by using a “star-sharing day” and differentiated questions so that lower-ability students could participate successfully. This strategy shows that reward systems need adaptation rather than uniform application. Students with different confidence levels, language abilities, and personalities may require different types of support.

Social-emotional side effects were also reported. Teachers observed jealousy, comparison, disappointment, and competition among students. These effects can influence classroom climate if not managed carefully. Rewards may encourage participation, but they may also create unhealthy comparison when students feel that rewards are unfair or when only the same active students repeatedly receive recognition. To reduce this problem, some teachers used group rewards and emphasized cooperation rather than individual competition. Participant 5, for example, shifted toward group-based rewards and verbal encouragement to reduce jealousy and dependency.

Another practical challenge was lesson condition. Participant 3 noted that students’ fatigue, especially related to lesson scheduling, could affect the success of reward systems. In such situations, rewards alone were not enough to maintain engagement. The teacher used storytelling and contextual examples to regain attention when students were tired. This finding reinforces the idea that rewards should not be treated as a single solution for engagement problems. They need to be combined with interesting materials, supportive classroom interaction, and flexible teaching strategies.

Overall, the challenges show that an effective reward system is not defined by the size or value of the prize. Instead, it depends on careful management, clear criteria, fairness, consistency, and gradual transition from tangible rewards reflectively rather than mechanically.

They adjusted reward types, modified criteria, used group rewards, differentiated questions, and reduced tangible rewards when necessary. These practices indicate that reward systems can support engagement when they are used as pedagogical tools rather than as permanent incentives.

d. Integration of Findings with Existing Knowledge

The findings of this study support previous research showing that rewards can increase motivation, participation, attentiveness, and classroom enthusiasm in English learning. The teachers’ accounts confirm that rewards may help students become more willing to participate and less afraid of making mistakes, particularly in speaking-related activities. This is consistent with studies that emphasize the role of rewards in supporting motivation and classroom involvement (Cahya et al., 2018; Husna & Syahrul, 2022; Satoto & Subekti, 2023; Maizari et al., 2024). However, this study extends the existing discussion by showing that rewards do not work automatically. Their value depends on how teachers design, communicate, distribute, and gradually adjust the reward system.

The study also contributes to a teacher-centered understanding of reward systems. Rather than treating rewards only as motivational objects, the findings show that rewards are part of teacher decision-making. Teachers decide which behaviors should be rewarded, how visible the rewards should be, whether rewards should be individual or group-based, and how to avoid dependency or jealousy. This supports Hoffmann et al. (2009), who argued that the teacher perspective on reward use needs more attention. In this study, teachers acted not merely as reward givers, but as classroom managers who continuously adjusted

rewards based on students' responses and classroom conditions.

Based on the findings, reward systems in English classrooms can be interpreted as temporary pedagogical scaffolding. They help students begin participating, build confidence, and experience recognition for effort and improvement. However, rewards should gradually lead students toward stronger learning habits, not keep them dependent on external incentives. This interpretation modifies the common view that rewards are simply tools for motivation. In the context of this study, rewards are better understood as structured classroom supports that can enhance engagement when they are fair, meaningful, transparent, and gradually connected to students' internal motivation.

Conclusions

This study explored how English teachers used rewards systems to enhance student engagement in English language learning. The findings show that rewards were not used as random gifts, but as structured classroom routines with clear targets. Teachers used rewards to encourage participation, effort, cooperation, task completion, peer assistance, and speaking attempts. Most teachers used simple and visible rewards, such as star stamps and point systems, because they were easy to apply and easy for students to understand. Some teachers also used small prizes, while others preferred social and verbal rewards such as praise and class applause. The reward systems influenced student engagement mainly through behavioral and affective dimensions. In terms of behavioral engagement, students became more active in answering questions, asking questions, completing tasks, and participating in classroom activities. In some classes, rewards also encouraged students became more enthusiastic, proud, confident, and less afraid of making mistakes. This was especially visible in speaking activities, where shy students

gradually became more willing to use English even when their responses were still imperfect or mixed with local language.

At the same time, the study found several challenges. Teachers reported difficulties in maintaining consistency and patience, particularly with younger learners. Some students remained passive and did not respond strongly to rewards. There were also signs of dependency, such as students expecting rewards continuously or feeling disappointed when rewards were not given. In addition, teachers identified social-emotional problems such as jealousy, comparison, and unhealthy competition. These findings indicate that rewards may support engagement, but they also need to be managed carefully.

To address these challenges, teachers used several strategies. They clarified rewards criteria, used group rewards to reduce competition, provided differentiated opportunities for lower ability students, created supportive classroom conditions, and gradually reduced tangible rewards while strengthening verbal encouragement. These strategies show that reward systems are more effective when they are fair, transparent, and connected to meaningful learning behaviors. Rewards should not be given for every small action because excessive reward use may weaken their instructional value and increase dependency.

The study concludes that reward systems can support student engagement in English classrooms, particularly in lower grades and beginner learning contexts. However, rewards are most useful as short-term support that helps students begin participating, build confidence, and develop positive classroom habits. Rewards should not be treated as a permanent source of motivation. Instead, they should function as a pedagogical bridge toward stronger learning habits, self-regulation, and internal motivation. For English teachers, this means that reward systems need to be planned

carefully, implemented consistently, and gradually shifted from tangible incentives to verbal encouragement, recognition, and meaningful learning engagement.

This study also implies that schools and teacher educators can support teachers by providing guidance on how to design fair, low-cost, and developmentally appropriate reward systems. Teacher training may include strategies for setting clear criteria, preventing reward dependency, managing jealousy, and using group-based rewards to strengthen cooperation. Future studies may include more classroom observations and longer time frames because this study relied mainly on teacher reports. Future researcher may also compare reward systems across different grade levels and explore students' perspectives to understand whether rewards are experienced as motivating, controlling, fair, or meaningful.

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