# THE SUBURBIA STRATEGY: POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT TO IMPROVE THE LEARNING FOCUS OF SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS (MBK)

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## ABSTRACT

This Positive Reinforcement was implemented in a suburban school in Hulu Selangor to help improve the learning focus of Special Needs Students (MBK). The use of *traffic light* cards and token economy are aimed to elevate their speaking skills and self-confidence during the lessons in the classes. Prior to the programme, pupils lacked self-confidence and were not open to confide their problems in the lessons with the teachers. Moreover, pupils inclined to ask questions irrelevant to the topics concerned. This implied that pupils were unable to have full grasp on the lessons and thus to create possible problems for them to incorporate the knowledge taught in the classes into their lives. Through quantitative findings based on the pupils' classwork and qualitative measurement based on *non-partisan* observation, it is found that Positive Reinforcement was considered successful as intervention strategy. Pupils are also seemed to be less-dependent on their peers and plagiarism amongst them was positively reduced. In order to enrich the knowledge of best practices in school, it is suggested that the whole unit of schools comprise of MBK and mainstream pupils to incorporate acculturation of *traffic light* cards so that conducive environment is to be conceived for teaching and facilitation sessions.

**Keywords**: Positive Reinforcement, Teaching and Facilitation (PdPc), Traffic Light, Token Economy, Special Needs Students

## 1.    Introduction

SK Serendah is a suburban school located in the district of Hulu Selangor. It comprises of mainstream pupils, the pre-schoolers and also pupils with learning disabilities or affectionately known as the Special Needs Students (MBK). With complex mixture of pupil population in the school, the Special Needs Students seemed to be intimidated by self-inferiority during social interactions with outsiders. This is supported by the stigma that MBK are difficult participants and mainstream pupils could not relate to them out of fear and apprehension (Shevlin and O'Moore, 2000). From this vein, it is evident that these MBK must be instilled with sturdier sense of self-confidence as study stated that they have psychological vulnerabilities in comparison to their mainstream counterparts and thus, confidence proved to be vital valve in rebuilding their emotional intelligence (Claretta et al., 2020) and ultimately to improve their social skills with the outsiders.

Positive Reinforcement has proven to be an effective approach to modify pupils' behaviours (Adamson et al., 2015; Watling and Schwartz, 2004; Cooper and Nye, 1994). In the context of Malaysia, there are several studies conducted to validate the efficiency of this approach. For example, Aziz and Yasin (2018) found that token economy as a form of Positive Reinforcement was able to improve concentration among MBK whereas Bakar and Zainal (2020) agreed that disruptive behaviour of ADHD pupil could be alleviated by using Positive Reinforcement. On top of that, Ali et al. (2014) were of opinion that all pupils especially the ones with disruptive behaviours generally respond well when Positive Reinforcement was applied during lessons in the classes.

Therefore, it is evident that Positive Reinforcement is a suitable approach to boost the confidence of the MBK in SK Serendah, Hulu Selangor.

## 2.    Reflection on Past Lessons

This research is conducted by two researchers namely an MBK Teacher (Researcher 1) and also a mainstream Teacher (Researcher 2) in order to enrich the analysis of the research via both emic and etic point of views.

After conducting lessons in classes, Researcher 1 would often resort into doing exercizes or quizzes. Subsequently, Researcher 1 would also be asking the pupils:

*"Do you get what I have taught you just now?"*
*"Yes, sir."*

However, Researcher 1 found that the outcomes of the lessons did not complement the oral affirmation given by the MBK. The pupils claimed they understood what were taught by their teachers but the outcomes did not reflect an in-depth understanding of the lessons. Thus, pupils were inclined to copy their peers' work during the exercizes or quizzes.

In this vein, researchers felt that there is a need for an intervention for these pupils in form of positive reinforcement so that they would not be left out from the lessons in the class. It would be a worrisome scenario if no intervention were implemented as it would engender more problems throughout the lessons.

## 3.    Focus of The Research

The focus of the Positive Reinforcement is on the speaking skills. This is essential as speaking skills are valves for pupils to build their self-confidence and this is often mirrored during the interaction of question-and-answer sessions with the teacher during lessons. If the pupils were not reactive in the class, it would be hard for the teacher to identify the pupils' incompetency. Besides that, the normalization of "copying culture" amongst the pupils would be rampant if they were still unwilling to be reactive towards their teachers. This could be seen during exercizes and quizzes sessions. Researcher 1 found that pupils were more inclined to copy their peers' work in comparison to ask the teacher or their friends themselves. Thus, it is evident that Positive Reinforcement must be implemented so that these "downside symptoms" are to be reduced in order to ensure a higher quality lesson by the teacher per se.

# 4.      Research Objectives

## 4.1      General Objective

The objective of this research is to improve the pupils' speaking skills and to boost their self-confidence. By doing this, it is aspired that pupils are able to participate in the higher quality lessons from the teacher.

## 4.2      Specific Objectives

1.  To assist pupils who dare to ask teachers in the classes during the lessons in order as means of encouragement for them to speak.
2.  To reduce pupils' inferiority via Positive Reinforcement by asking simple phrases in order to boost their self-confidence.

# 5.      Focus Group

The focus group for this research comprises of 8 MBK pupils from PPKI Bayu. Researchers decided to implement Positive Reinforcement on these pupils so that their interests would be spurred positively towards the lessons. Through this, it is hoped that their speaking skills and self-confidence would be improved. This Positive Reinforcement was implemented within the span period of 5 weeks after the school reopened after Movement Control Order (MCO) 2.0.

# 6.      Research Implementation

## 6.1      Research Gap (Issues)

The research gap is identified via observation and pupils' outcomes.

### 6.1.1  Observation

Researchers conducted pre and post observations on the pupils' understanding towards their lessons with the teacher. Prior to the Positive Reinforcement, pupils were seen to be less focused and unable to gauge the lesson conducted by the teacher. However after reinforcement was implemented, it was found that there was positive improvement amongst the pupils where pupils were more confident during their interaction with teachers.

### 6.1.2  Pupils' Outcomes

Researchers checked the pupils' workbooks twice that was before and after the lessons conducted. Prior to the Positive Reinforcement, researchers found that there were pupils who were nonchalant and simply completed the works for the sake of teachers' instructions per se.

## 6.2    Analysis on Research Gap

### 6.2.1  Analysis on Observation

Based on the observation conducted after the implementation of Positive Reinforcement, it was found that there were positive observable changes from their voices and body languages as well as the intonation of their interactions with the teachers within the 5 weeks span of the programme. The qualitative measurement can be summarized as per Table 1 and Table 2 below:

*Table 1: Pre-Positive Reinforcement Observation on Pupils*

| |
|---|
| **PRE- POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT OBSERVATION**<br>**Date**   : 2nd of  November 2020<br>**Place**  :  PPKI Bayu<br>**Time**  : During school hours<br>**Remarks**   :<br>Pupils are having low self-esteemed and do not dare to ask the teachers directly. Apart from that, they are also passive throughout the lessons. Pupils also seemed mortified when teachers asked them and when they attempted to answer the questions posed, the voices were wavered and heads were cowered due to inferiority. |

*Table 2: Post-Positive Reinforcement Observation on Pupils*

| |
|---|
| **POST- POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT OBSERVATION**<br><br>**Date**   : 1st of April 2021<br><br>**Place**  :  PPKI Bayu<br><br>**Time**  : During school hours<br><br>**Remarks**   :<br><br>Pupils are more confident in comparison to pre-Positive Reinforcement days. They are more willing to ask the teachers if they were to encounter any problem during the lessons. Apart from that, they are also seemed to be less nervous when they are asked by the teachers. Comparatively, their voices becoming more audible and steady when they interact with teachers as opposed prior to Positive Reinforcement intervention programme. |

1.    Pupils were orally more confident to answer questions posed by the teacher. They answered with audible voice and did not cowered their faces when teacher asked them.
2.    Pupils were able to identify and correct the errors in sentences that were purposely inserted by the teachers in order to test their understanding and remembrance.
3.    The environments in the classes were more conducive and motivating in comparison to the conditions prior to the reinforcement.

## 6.2.2 Analysis on Pupils' Outcomes

Based the analysis on the pupils' outcomes after the implementation of reinforcement, it is found that there are positive changes amongst the pupils. This is implied from the quantitative findings based on the number of pupils who demonstrated changes in dependency towards their peers and decreasing numbers in copying the peers' classwork as per Table 3 below.

*Table 3: Number of Pupils Demonstrating Positive Changes during Pre-Positive Reinforcement and Post-Positive Reinforcement.*

| Subjects | Number of Pupils | | Remarks |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Pre-Positive Reinforcement | Post-Positive Reinforcement | |
| Malay Language | 1/8 | 6/8 | Before the reinforcement was implemented, researchers found that only one out of eight pupils did the classwork without copying the peers. After the reinforcement was implemented, it is found that six pupils became independent and attempted to do their classwork on their own. |
| English Language | 1/8 | 5/8 | Before the reinforcement was implemented, researchers found that only one out of eight pupils did the classwork without copying the peers. After the reinforcement was implemented, it is found that five pupils became independent and attempted to do their classwork on their own. |
| Mathematics | 1/8 | 6/8 | Before the reinforcement was implemented, researchers found that only one out of eight pupils did the classwork without copying the peers. After the reinforcement was implemented, it is found that five pupils became independent and attempted to do their classwork on their own. |
| Science | 1/8 | 6/8 | Before the reinforcement was implemented, researchers found that only one out of eight pupils did the classwork without copying the peers. After the reinforcement was implemented, it is found that six pupils became independent and attempted to do their classwork on their own. |

1. Pupils diligently did the work delegated by their teachers and more committed as compared prior to the reinforcement.
2. Pupils were able to participate in discussion with their peers and teachers with more improved confidence. Prior to this, pupils were shy to ask their peers or teachers whereby discussion was non-existent.
3. Plagiarism or copying peers' work amongst pupils were positively reduced.

## 6.3    Action Research

Based on general survey, it was found that pupils were shy to ask the teacher or their peers in the classes during the lesson. This is because some of the pupils were not interested with the subject of the lesson, lack of self-confidence and afraid of teachers who were strict in the class. Therefore, researchers aim to use the findings of this research to assist own pupils during own lessons. In order to solve the problem, Positive Reinforcement is to be introduced to the pupils via usage of *Traffic Light* cards and also token economy:

1. First, researchers are to brief the teachers on how to use and incorporate *traffic light* card*s* in their lessons.
2. After that, researchers are to brief the pupils on how to use *traffic light* cards during the lessons and remind them that there would be rewards awaiting for them if they were willing to participate in the reinforcement programme.
3. Pupils could ask whatever related to the class lessons.
4. In order to encourage pupils to use the *traffic light* cards during the lessons, teacher would give them coloured stickers as Positive Reinforcement stimulus.
5. However, it should be noted that not all questions would be given the coloured stickers. Teacher would only give if pupils were to ask questions related to the lessons. If teachers were satisfied with the questions, then only the coloured stickers would be given to the pupils.
6. Rewards could be redeemed according to the numbers of coloured stickers collected by the pupils.
7. The more coloured stickers that were collected, the bigger rewards to be redeemed by pupils.
8. Researchers to prepare the Rewards Timetable with the names of pupils who joined this Positive Reinforcement programme in the class.
9. The green *traffic light* cards means that pupils understand the lesson conducted by teacher.
10. The *red traffic light* cards means that pupils do not understand the lesson conducted by teacher.
11. *The yellow traffic light* cards means that pupils do not understand or that pupils want teacher to repeat the parts in the lesson they do not understand.

## 6.4    Implementation of Positive Reinforcement

This Positive Reinforcement was implemented within the span period of 5 weeks. When researchers started the reinforcement programme on March 2021 due to the Movement Control Order 2.0, researchers knew that it was not going to be a smooth-flowing programme as there were a lot of SOPs to be adhered in the midst of the pandemic. Therefore, researchers were tasked to think on the best practices suitable to cater to the needs of the pupils as well as to accommodate to the current health climates. After several discussions and deliberations, researchers and the teachers decided to implement this reinforcement programme on pupils from PPKI Bayu.

Researchers conducted the observations and analysed the pupils' workbooks as the lesson outcomes every week. Apart from that, researchesr also briefly explained the concept and the impact of this Positive Reinforcement to the teachers and asked for their feedback to improve the execution of the programme.

Based on the observations, it is found that this reinforcement has successfully improve the pupils' self-confidence. Pupils were beginning to be more open to the teachers and dared to ask the teachers to voice out the problems they encountered during the lessons. On top of that, the quality of their lesson outcomes seemed to be improved after this reinforcement programme was implemented to the pupils as the pupils and teachers were overwhelmed with excitement during the lessons. In addition, teachers also were being transparent in sharing their constructive opinions as well as encouragement to researchers throughout the implementation of this programme.

## 6.5 Reflection on the Research

From this research, we found that the Positive Reinforcement programme has helped pupils to boost their self-confidence and their level of remembrance as well as the understanding on lessons conducted. Thus, the lessons became more fun and enjoyable in comparison to the ones prior to the programme.

Nevertheless, there were also some pupils who still struggling on how to use the *traffic light* due to their inconsistency of attendance to the school. On top of that, some of them were still very shy and hesitant to open up towards new approach introduced by researchers and teachers. Hence, they resorted into the easiest way out which was to commit plagiarism or copying the works of the peers.

We were also overwhelmed by the response and encouragement given by the teachers as we discussed on how to catapult the potential of this programme to cater to the needs of these pupils. Somehow we were inspired and aspired by the positive feedback of these teachers too. We believe that this Positive Reinforcement encapsulates myriads of potential serving as tool to improve the pupils' performance in the classes as well as to equip them with sense of self-confidence while interacting with their peers.

## 7.0   Suggestion for Future Research

There are a few suggestions for future research identified from this programme:

1.   To gauge the effect of *traffic light* acculturation in the school where teachers are to implement this in all classes for pupils with special needs.
2.   To gauge the effect on pupils' self-confidence if teachers were to use behavioural approach to break the ice (patting the head, show thumbs-up signal) in comparison to oral approach as per the conducted research.
3.   To gauge the effect on pupils' interest when types of rewards are diversified
4.   To gauge the success of Positive Reinforcement according to parameter of financial allocation to the school.

On whole based on this action research, we found that there were positive changes in terms of the teachers' teachings and also the pupils' learnings. We aim to incorporate this

programme in all classes (Special Needs and mainstream classes) so that the environment of the lessons is to be conducive and encouraging for pupils to gain knowledge in the school.

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