

The Use of the Token Economy in ESL Classrooms During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract—The token economy is a pivotal notion in educational settings for maintaining good classroom behaviours among learners. Despite the burgeoning number of studies conducted to determine the efficiency of the token economy, most have been primarily interested in the learners' perspective. With a gap in the literature to investigate the phenomenon from the educators' perspectives, the present study surveyed 154 English teachers in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The respondents who taught at government schools were involved in examining the token economy as an approach to behavioural management and learning engagement. The data collection was performed through a self-completed questionnaire survey of Google Form via various online platforms. The study showed that Malaysian English teachers from government schools were in complete agreement that the implementation of the token economy in ESL classrooms is effective in eliciting desired behaviours and reducing disruptive behaviours among learners. Social and physical reinforcement were the most effective forms of the token economy in the classroom as opposed to other types of reinforcement. The implications of the study include the possibility of the token economy becoming a catalyst in the educational landscape for changing behaviour and boosting learning motivation, particularly among young learners who are usually emotionally sensitive.

Index Terms—token economy, teachers' perspective, behaviour management, learning engagement, Covid-19 pandemic

I. INTRODUCTION

The token economy is a notion derived from Skinner's (1953) operant learning theory, which associates rewards and punishments with desired behaviours in the classroom. Positive and negative reinforcements are used in Skinner's operant conditioning to encourage good or desired behaviour while discouraging undesirable behaviour. Learners at a very young age learn through this process and develop behaviours accordingly. Teachers play a critical role in deciding the success or failure of any subject in schools because they form an integral part of the classroom and the overall educational setting (Philip et al., 2019; Siti & Nur-Ehsan, 2019; Thang et al., 2011). When teachers commend students for their good behaviour, particular learners will likely emulate such behaviour in the future. When learners are not acknowledged or rewarded for their actions, they often resort to acts that result in rewards or recognition. Some learners are also left feeling frustrated and underappreciated when teachers let them wait indefinitely for approval of their behaviours, leading to resistance to meet teachers' expectations, as they feel deceived or exploited (Tan et al., 2022).

In meeting the demand for 21st-century education, the Malaysian government has urged a dedicated corner of the token economy. Nevertheless, its application is not adequately supported by research evidence from the local context to estimate its effectiveness. Driven by this lack of evidence, it is urgent to investigate whether the token economy is practised throughout the year in the classroom or only for a particular period. Before nationwide implementation, it is imperative to determine whether teachers think and agree that the token economy is effective in English language learning in Malaysian classrooms.

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Thus, the present study aims to investigate English teachers' perceptions of the token economy in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although studies have been carried out about rewards in the classroom, research on primary schoolteachers' points of view and the use of rewards in Malaysian English classrooms is still limited. Despite the many different types of rewards to be used in primary classrooms (Tan & Chee, 2021), it remains uncertain if they align with teachers' points of view and preferences. As the token economy was traditionally implemented in regular classrooms before the COVID-19 pandemic, it presents a novel condition for how teachers carry it out during online teaching and learning sessions. Four research questions were formulated as follows:

- i. What are teachers' perceptions of the token economy?
- ii. How does the use of the token economy affect behavioural management and learning engagement in Malaysian ESL classrooms?
- iii. What is the most effective type of token economy used in Malaysian ESL classrooms?
- iv. How do teachers apply the token economy in online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Theoretical Framework

Skinner (1953) referred to any reinforcing stimulus that strengthens the targeted behaviour as positive reinforcement. As such, the token economy is a system that elicits desired behaviours from learners without negatively affecting them physically or emotionally. The token economy approach in the present study is in line with Skinner's operant conditioning (see Figure 1). The response refers to a certain set of behaviours displayed by the learners or research participants, and when a stimulus in the form of positive or negative reinforcement is presented, it results in the desired behaviour.

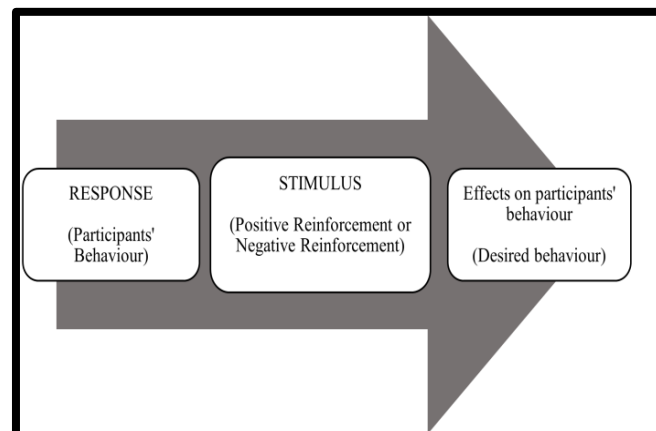


Figure 1: Skinner's Operant Conditioning

The reinforcement theory of motivation focuses on the changes that take place when engaging in certain behaviours. Therefore, Skinner emphasised the importance of the external environment being structured properly and positively to elicit the desired behaviour. Even though the theory revolves around significant tools for controlling a person's activity and behaviour, it ignores the reasons behind people's actions. To achieve an effective outcome by using the token economy system, several protocols must be followed (see Figure 2).

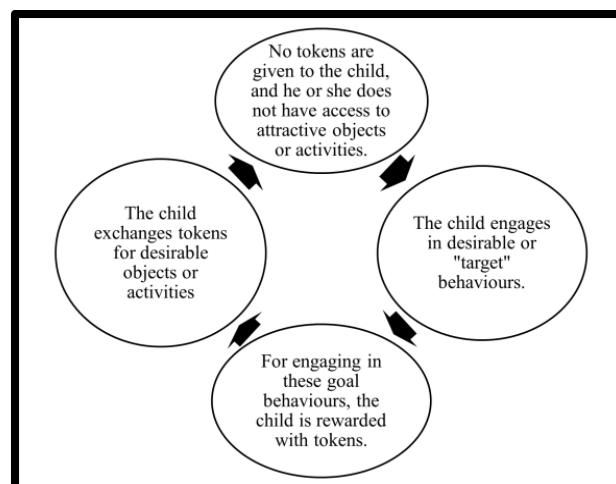


Figure 2: Basic Token Economy Cycle (Miltenberger, 2008)

The first step is to decide on the desired behaviour at the end of the process. With a clear goal in mind, the following step is the introduction or exposure of the targeted behaviour to the learners or research participants. They must be made aware of the behaviour expected of them that would warrant the tokens. This is followed by the implementation of the intervention, which should match the learners' needs. In other words, rewards or tokens must attract their interest. If the tokens are unattractive to them, the effort will be of little or no avail, for they will not be motivated to display the targeted behaviour. Thus, the elements in the token economy system must be well-planned to achieve the utmost outcome.

B. The Token Economy

Tokens are divided into two main categories: social reinforcement and tangible/concrete rewards. Social reinforcement has become the most popular form of incentive among learners due to its free-of-charge nature, with no extensive planning required. Applause, smiles, nods and embraces are some examples of social reinforcement. This type of token is considered to be the best to offer to students in appreciation and recognition of the completed tasks (Aziz & Yasin, 2018; Prawiro & Anggrarini, 2019). Tangible or concrete rewards include presenting real prizes, which have been shown to improve students' willingness to learn, particularly in English. Teachers have reported observing a shift in attitudes of children who were previously passive to becoming more active and students who were frequently absent to being always present, as well as an improvement in academic performance (Aziz & Yasin, 2018; Cahya et al., 2018; Sak et al., 2016).

C. Behavioural Management

Classroom participation and communication are important elements in acquiring knowledge (Nur-Ehsan et al., 2018; Farashaiyan, 2012). Many studies have reported positive findings on behavioural management when the token economy was used with young learners. The system helps to impact diligence positively, as teachers noticed the regularity and higher number of assignments completed by the learners and the decrease in disruptive classroom actions. This suggests that positive reinforcement through a token economy may change behaviours substantially for the better while increasing academic engagement between the treatment and control groups (Aziz & Yasin, 2018; Klimas & McLaughlin, 2007; Ramaitaa et al., 2018; Yaseen & Tahar, 2018; Zlomke & Zlomke, 2003).

D. Learning Engagement

As far as the learning engagement of young learners is concerned, the token economy plays a crucial role by getting them to feel motivated to learn regardless of the subject or course difficulty. It is a critical part of teaching and learning because academic staff are accountable for developing and delivering lessons that allow students to maximise their intrinsic potential to succeed, affecting learners' academic achievement (Aljuhaish, 2015; Kasyulita & Armelida, 2019; Indrawati et al., 2021; Jabeen et al., 2015; Khaliq et al., 2016; Sidiq et al., 2020; Stephen & Singh, 2017).

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design, Instrument and Respondents

The present study employed the quantitative approach of a survey design. The survey format was chosen to reach out to a greater number of respondents anonymously, while avoiding the bias that would otherwise influence the outcome of the research. The survey design was also most convenient during the pandemic.

A self-completed questionnaire was the main instrument used for data collection. Questions for the survey were adapted from past studies to accommodate the Malaysian context. The questionnaire was meant to measure the extent to which the respondents agreed or disagreed with the given statements. A pilot test was carried out, and the validity of the questionnaire items using concurrent and discriminant variables was estimated using SPSS software. The Cronbach's alpha reading was carried out with items on Likert scales. Necessary revisions were made to produce valid questionnaire items, and the final Cronbach's alpha value was 0.728 (Fig. 3).

Case Processing Summary			
		N	%
Cases	Valid	20	80.0
	Excluded	5	20.0
	Total	25	100.0
Reliability Statistics			
Cronbach's alpha		N of Items	
.728		20	

Figure 3: Cronbach's Alpha Reading

The research sample was obtained through convenience sampling, consisting of primary/elementary schoolteachers from Malaysian government schools who were currently teaching English. A total of 154 English teachers participated in the survey.

B. Data Collection Method and Analysis

After the questionnaire items were finalised, the survey was reformatted to a Google Form to allow respondents to submit their responses online. This mode was more convenient than a traditional survey, as the questionnaire link was shared electronically through Telegram or WhatsApp. Having obtained an essential amount of data, the responses were analysed using SPSS to obtain the mean for each construct. The visual presentation of the data involved the use of tables and graphs.

IV. RESULTS

A. Teachers' Perceptions of the Token Economy

Table 1 displays the mean score of the first construct, viz. the teacher's perception of the token economy. With 20 items measuring the construct, all the mean scores exceeded 4.00, indicating that most of the teachers agreed with the statements on the token economy. The items with the highest mean score ($m = 4.44$) are related to the *reward system being most effective when pupils determine their own goals for success* (item 1), *how rewards help teachers' confidence when managing the classroom* (item 16) and *how rewards motivate learning* (item 17). Thus, concerning the first construct, the respondents were shown to have a strong belief in the use of the token economy in ESL classrooms.

TABLE 1
TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE TOKEN ECONOMY

No.	Teacher's Perception	Mean
1	The reward system is most effective when pupils determine their own goals for success.	4.44
2	The use of extrinsic rewards ultimately leads to a decrease in intrinsic motivation.	4.31
3	Rewards increase pupils' participation.	4.40
4	Pupils should be rewarded for good behaviour.	4.38
5	Pupils should be rewarded for good academic performance.	4.36
6	Pupils are more motivated by rewards than by verbal or written praise.	4.38
7	Specific verbal or written praise is given to my pupils in my classroom.	4.38
8	The reward system is very efficient to be used in my classroom.	4.33
9	The reward system is an effective strategy for managing disruptive behaviour.	4.39
10	The reward system increases academic success.	4.36
11	Rewards are given to help pupils reach a certain goal.	4.36
12	Rewards are given to help teachers achieve desired behaviours.	4.36
13	Rewards can be used for classroom management.	4.38
14	Rewards help teachers carry out teaching and learning sessions smoothly.	4.38
15	Rewards play an important part in the teaching and learning sessions.	4.33
16	Rewards help teachers run a classroom confidently.	4.44
17	Rewards can help pupils become motivated to learn.	4.44
18	Rewards help teachers guide pupils to reach the learning objectives.	4.36
19	Rewards are given to ensure pupils' participation in the teaching and learning session.	4.40
20	Rewards are useful for teachers.	4.35
	Total Average	4.37

B. Token Economy Behavioural Management and Learning Engagement

Tables 2 and 3 display all the items that measure the constructs of learning engagement and behavioural management. There were six items to measure learning engagement, with an average mean score of 4.38. The fourth item – *Rewards can help pupils be motivated to learn* – recorded the highest mean score ($m = 4.44$), while the first item – *Pupils should be rewarded for good academic performance*, the second item – *Reward systems increase academic success*, the third item – *Rewards are given to help pupils reach a certain goal* and the fifth item – *Rewards help teachers guide pupils to reach the learning objectives*, all recorded the lowest mean score ($m = 4.36$).

TABLE 2
USE OF THE TOKEN ECONOMY FOR LEARNING ENGAGEMENT

No.	Learning Engagement	Mean score
1	Pupils should be rewarded for good academic performance.	4.36
2	Reward systems increase academic success.	4.36
3	Rewards are given to help pupils reach a certain goal.	4.36
4	Rewards can help pupils be motivated to learn.	4.44
5	Rewards help teachers guide pupils to reach the learning objectives.	4.36
6	Rewards are given to ensure pupils' participation in the teaching and learning session.	4.40
	Total Average	4.38

Concerning behavioural management, Table 3 displays all six items measuring the particular construct. The first item – *Rewards increase pupils' participation* – indicated the highest mean score ($m = 4.40$), while the second item – *Pupils should be rewarded for good behaviour*, the fifth item – *Rewards can be used for classroom management* and the sixth

item – *Rewards help teachers carry out teaching and learning sessions smoothly*, all indicated the lowest mean score (m = 4.38).

TABLE 3
USE OF TOKEN ECONOMY FOR BEHAVIOURAL MANAGEMENT

No.	Behavioural Management	Mean score
1	Rewards increase pupils' participation.	4.40
2	Pupils should be rewarded for good behaviour.	4.38
3	The reward system is an effective strategy for managing disruptive behaviour.	4.39
4	Rewards are given to help teachers achieve the desired behaviour.	4.39
5	Rewards can be used for classroom management.	4.38
6	Rewards help teachers carry out teaching and learning sessions smoothly.	4.38
	Total Average	4.38

With all items exceeding a mean score of 4.36, the respondents showed positive feedback on the use of token economy in promoting learning engagement and in managing behaviour in ESL classrooms.

C. *Types of Token Economy*

Figure 4 comprises the common types of the token economy that were applied by the respondents in their respective ESL classrooms. The most common type of token economy is physical reinforcement, which includes tangible rewards such as cookies, books, stickers, candies and gifts. The majority (54.2%) of respondents applied this type of reinforcement.

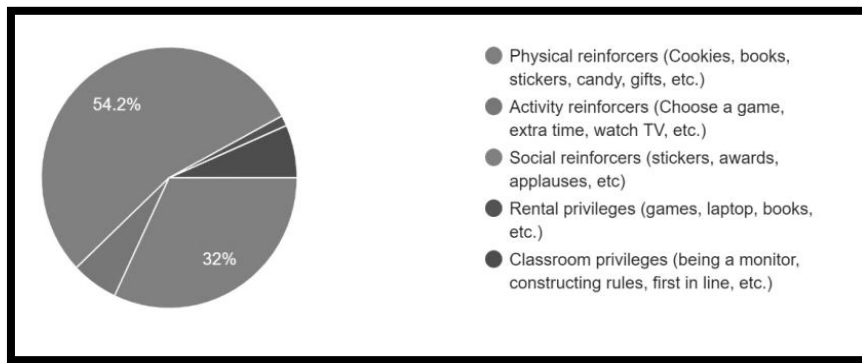


Figure 4: Types of Token Economy

Figure 5 shows that 98% of respondents in the survey believed that physical reinforcement was the most effective form of token economy to motivate learners during teaching and learning sessions. Following this is social reinforcement, as 97% of the respondents indicated that it was also an effective form of token economy in the ESL classroom. Figure 5 shows the responses from the teachers regarding the most effective type of token economy in Malaysian ESL classrooms.

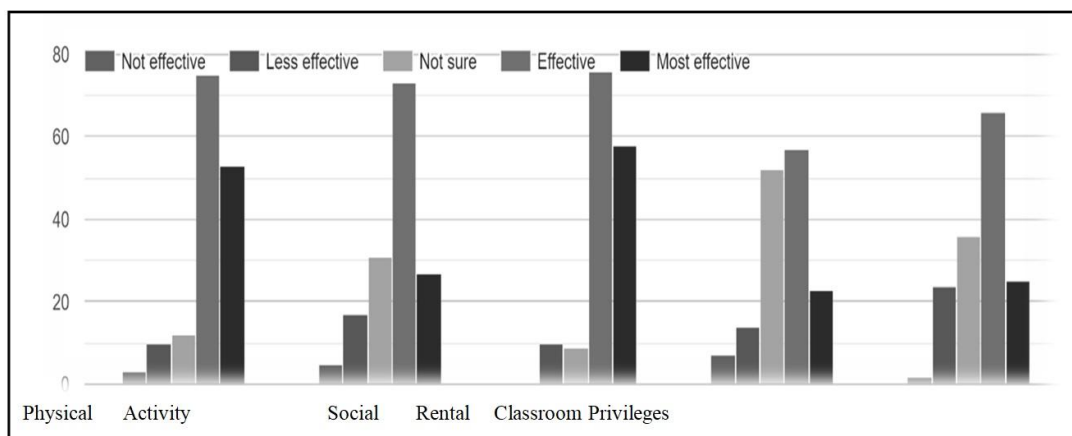


Figure 5: Effectiveness of the Different Forms of Token Economy

The majority of the respondents agreed that physical and social reinforcement were the most effective forms of the token economy in Malaysian ESL classrooms. Activity reinforcement, such as extra time for early recess, also gained substantial positive responses from the teachers. Meanwhile, classroom privileges and rental reinforcement were not

strongly favoured by the respondents when compared to the other types of reinforcement. Many of them were uncertain about the effectiveness of rental reinforcement and classroom privilege reinforcement on learners.

D. Importance of the Token Economy

Figure 6 displays the responses gathered from the respondents regarding the reasons for using the token economy in their classrooms. The majority responded that they had been using a token economy in their classrooms to increase pupils’ participation, followed by the intention to motivate their pupils to learn.

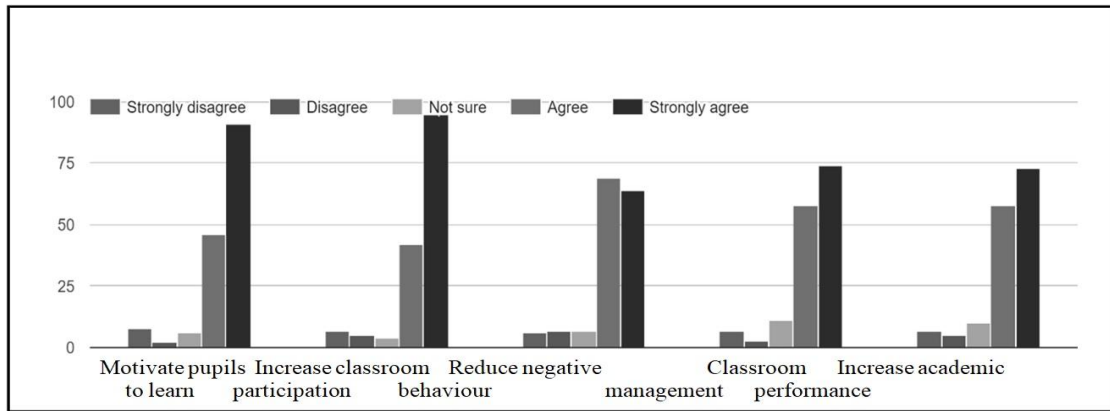


Figure 6: Reasons for Using the Token Economy

TABLE 4
TEACHERS’ REASONS FOR USING THE TOKEN ECONOMY

Number	Why do you reward your pupils during this pandemic?	Frequency
1	To keep the pupils motivated throughout online classes	55
2	To encourage the pupils’ participation and attendance during online classes	63
3	To appreciate the pupils’ effort throughout online classes	7
4	To encourage the pupils to put in more effort during online classes	11
5	To enhance the pupils’ learning interest throughout online learning	18

Table 4 shows the reasons given by the teachers for why they were providing rewards for their pupils during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The answers given by the teachers to this open-ended question were similar in context. Therefore, the idea was tabulated to meet the main point of their answers. According to the table, most teachers are keen on implementing the token economy during their online teaching and learning sessions to keep the pupils motivated to learn and to increase the pupils’ participation and attendance in online classes.

In addition, some of them stated that they used the token economy to increase pupils’ academic performance. Lastly, the respondents were found to use token economy systems in their classrooms for classroom management and to reduce negative or disruptive behaviours among the learners. Figure 7 shows the frequency of respondents’ application of the token economy in their classroom. The teachers implemented the token economy system at least once a month in their classrooms. A small number of respondents (0.7%) stated that they had never applied the token economy in their ESL classrooms.

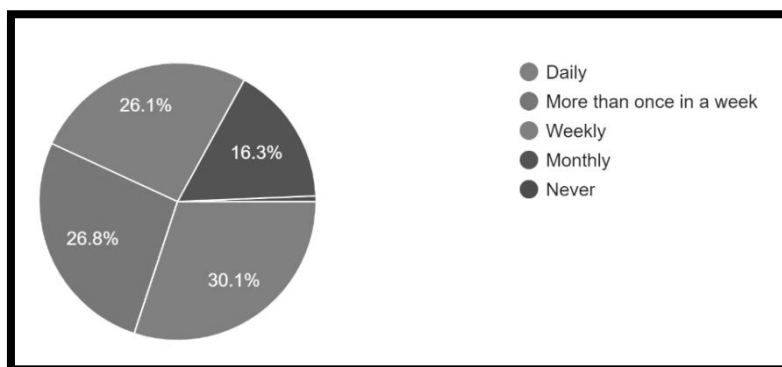


Figure 7: Frequency of Use of Token Economy in the Classroom

The teachers also stated that they usually implemented token systems in groups and as individuals in their classrooms, with a total of 67.3% of the respondents. This shows that the token economy is widely used in Malaysian classrooms for different forms and purposes.

E. Implementation of the Token Economy During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a strong impact on our education system, paving the path for online learning to ensure that no pupils are left behind in gaining access to education. The face-to-face traditional classroom method has been replaced with various online platforms. Five questions regarding the use of the token economy during the COVID-19 pandemic were asked. Figure 8 shows the number of teachers who implemented the token economy in their teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

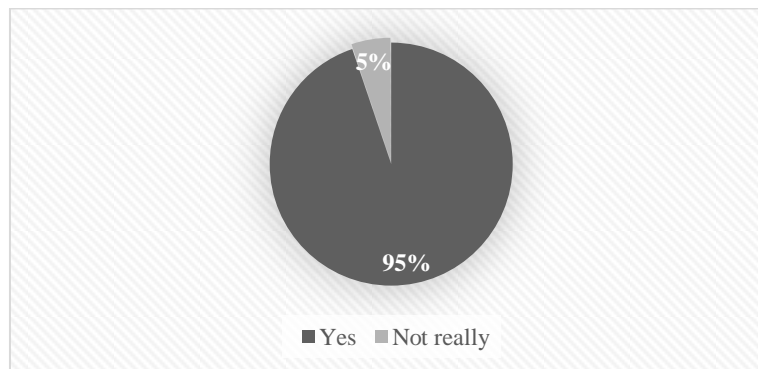


Figure 8: Implementation of the Token Economy During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Figure 8 shows the number of teachers who implemented the token economy in teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. 95% of the respondents, which makes up the majority (146 out of 154 teachers), implemented the token economy during their online teaching and learning sessions during the pandemic. For further details, Figure 9 indicates how often the teachers provided rewards to the pupils during the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 42 teachers rewarded their pupils daily, and 29 rewarded their pupils after each lesson. They also mentioned that they rewarded their pupils after they submitted tasks for the day. Thirty-nine teachers mentioned that they rewarded their pupils weekly, and 36 of them rewarded pupils monthly. Lastly, eight teachers mentioned that they did not reward their pupils throughout their online teaching and learning lessons.

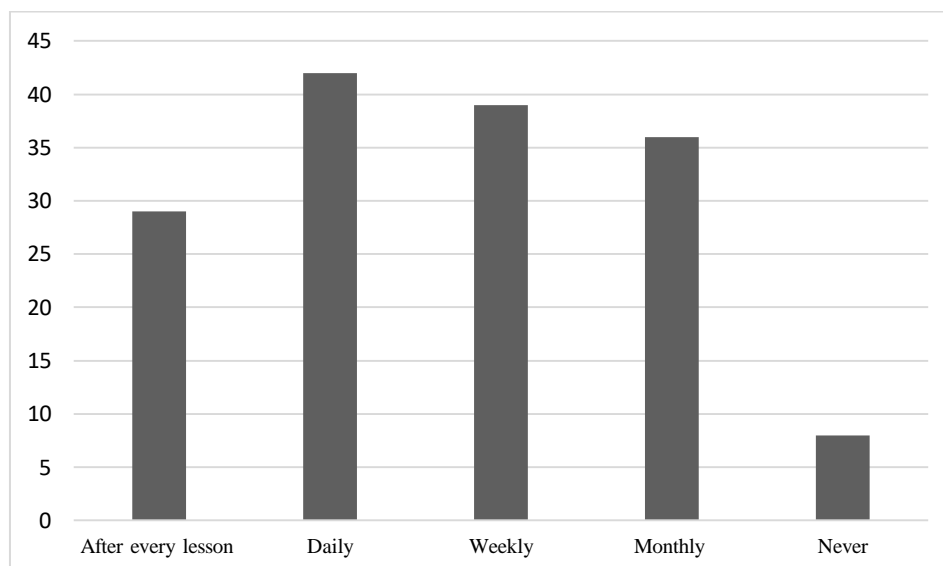


Figure 9: Frequency of Implementation of the Token Economy in the Classroom During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Table 5 comprises the list of methods used by the respondents in implementing the token economy in their teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their answers are tabulated, and similar ideas are merged. The data tabulation shows that many teachers have been putting considerable effort, despite the movement control order, into rewarding their pupils during the online mode of teaching and learning.

TABLE 5
WAYS TO IMPLEMENT THE TOKEN ECONOMY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Physical reinforcement	Social reinforcement	Activity reinforcement
1. Certificate or voucher	1. Positive feedback and praise	1. Online games
2. Star chart	2. WhatsApp stickers	2. Allowing pupils to choose what activity/game to do for their next lesson
3. Sending rewards to their houses	3. Positive voice notes	
4. Cookies	4. Praise on social media	
5. Cash or chocolate bouquets		
6. Presents		
7. Gifts placed at the guard house, where the parents will collect them		
8. 'Top-ups', cash, presents and their favourite foods		
9. Buying things online (Shopee or Lazada) and sending them to their houses		

Figure 10 shows the impact of the token economy on pupils' learning engagement and behaviour throughout online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of the teachers agreed that the token economy had a huge impact on pupils' learning engagement and behavioural management, even though it was implemented in online classes during the pandemic.

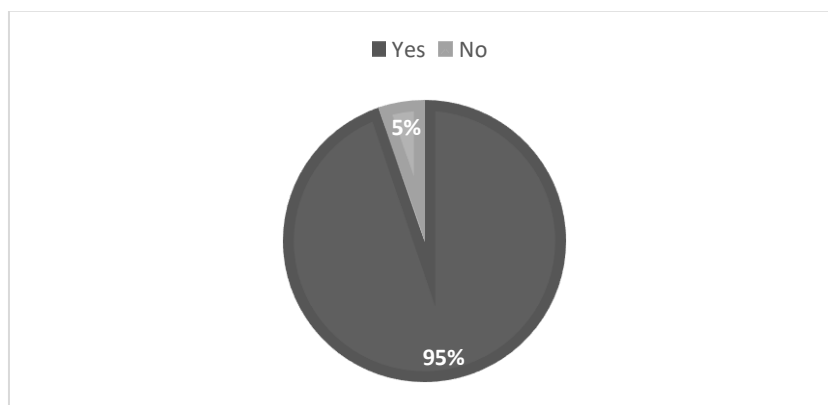


Figure 10: Teachers Who Agree That the Token Economy Has a Positive Effect on Pupils' Learning Engagement

The teachers were asked how the implementation of the token economy during the pandemic would help in learning engagement among their pupils. Most answers were positive, as the teachers acknowledged that when they rewarded the learners, their attendance in online classes increased. The pupils were also noted to seem motivated to join classes and pay extra attention during class. Furthermore, the number of pupils who completed and submitted their tasks for online lessons increased. Some teachers stated that the token economy motivated pupils to compete among themselves in completing tasks well to earn rewards. This has helped the teachers achieve the lesson objectives. Most of the teachers were able to elicit active participation from pupils during online classes. They stated that they were able to create an effective two-way interaction during the lesson by implementing a token economy. Moreover, some teachers stated that the token economy boosted pupils' confidence to put in more effort in completing their tasks. Pupils actively participated by replying to questions during their online classes, and they were attentive throughout the session. Once the learners received some level of reward, they felt appreciated and seemed to be willing to participate actively during the online class.

V. DISCUSSION

The use of the token economy is popular among primary ESL teachers. Although this approach is commonly used by teachers, a few elements differ in terms of usage and implementation. Teachers have their own justifications for the type of token economy used. They also have their own timing on when to reward their pupils. The efficacy of token systems may be reliant on the frequent identification of strong backup reinforcement (Fiske et al., 2015). By analysing the information from the questionnaire, we can learn the reasons behind the implementation of each type of token economy in the classroom. Most of the teachers do not restrict themselves to implementing only one type of token economy; they use different types of reinforcement. They also combine two or more types of reinforcement at a time to be implemented in their classrooms, such as physical and social reinforcement.

Besides, teachers in general have strong positive feedback on the implementation of the token economy. They believe that the token economy is very effective in managing their classrooms and motivating their pupils to learn. In general, most teachers implement the token economy in their classrooms for any reason. The reasons given by the teachers can be categorised into a few groups, namely, behavioural management, learning engagement and motivation. Teachers

recognise the effectiveness of the token economy depending on the type of token economy used in each situation. By analysing the teachers' points of view, we were able to justify the reasons behind the types of token economy used and how frequently that type of token economy was used in Malaysian ESL classrooms. The teachers' perceptions further helped in understanding the impact of the token economy system on pupils.

Some types of the token economy are more effective than others. The token economy is one approach in which structure can be introduced. It clearly explains the learning task and defines the components of the environment to be addressed using a variety of reinforcements (Varghese et al., 2015). Teachers effectively implement the use of physical reinforcement and believe that it can trigger their pupils' intrinsic motivation. The reinforcement helped the teachers elicit the desired behaviour from the pupils. The token economy has a favourable influence on motivation. Therefore, their long-term effects, as well as their acute effects, must be examined (Visaria et al., 2016). The second most common type of reinforcement is social reinforcement, whereby the teacher praises the pupils verbally or spontaneously through physical gestures for their good behaviour. Token economies often demonstrate positive effects. It has been demonstrated that pro-social verbal and physical behaviours increase with the initiation of a token economy system (Wolfe et al., 2003). This is believed to make the pupils feel appreciated for their good deeds and to motivate them to continue portraying the desired behaviours.

Physical rewards were considered to be the most effective among the respondents. Teachers commonly use small tangible items in their classrooms to reward their pupils. The teachers' view shows that physical reinforcement is a quick and effective way to elicit the desired behaviour from pupils. Teachers agree that it develops pupils' motivation to behave well in the classroom and engage actively in class. By rewarding pupils with physical reinforcement, the teachers claimed to be able to increase appropriate behaviour and classroom participation.

Moreover, the main reason behind the implementation of the token economy in ESL classrooms is behavioural management and learning engagement. The use of the token economy provides positive feedback by indicating that participants' performance improved in the task given by the teacher (Steel et al., 2016). Pupils are motivated when they are rewarded for their classroom participation. This finding indicated that teachers strongly believed that implementing a token economy can help pupils' participation in the classroom and would help in their classroom management. However, no comments were given on rewarding pupils for their academic achievement. The teachers believed that rewarding the pupils for the effort they put in during the teaching and learning sessions would eventually improve their academic performance.

The token economy is important for implementation in Malaysian ESL classrooms and has many advantages. It is believed to help motivate pupils to learn and improve their academic performance. However, the main purpose of implementing it is behavioural management. When students receive a reward in the classroom, it suggests that it is beneficial to students, particularly in English classroom learning activities (Widya & Watina, 2019). The token economy is a vital tool to be implemented in the classroom to develop pupils' extrinsic motivation. It is seen to be beneficial in the classroom, whether for behavioural management or learning engagement. Moreover, the token economy is seen to increase pupils' overall attention to a given task (Williamson & McFadzen, 2020).

VI. CONCLUSION

A token economy, if implemented successfully, can be a catalyst for changing behaviour and enhancing pupils' academic performance. Therefore, teachers should incorporate a token economy system into their classrooms. This system is effective in terms of motivating and inspiring pupils, particularly those in primary schools. In the educational context, schools could modify the token economy system into a flexible and effective intervention, particularly in schools for young learners. Although thorough execution is required, such a strategy offers considerable advantages in terms of improving education quality and providing an improved learning environment for learners.

Additionally, this study adds to our understanding of how teachers in ESL classrooms use token economies. It has established various implications for teaching and learning. Future research should consider looking into teachers' reasons for choosing certain types of reinforcements to be implemented in their classrooms. More research can be done on goal setting and how teachers reward their pupils based on pupils' progress. How teachers implement the token economy system and how that affects their pupils should be the focus of future research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors received support from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia from Research Grant GGPM-2019-012 and the Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

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