

From Scaffolding to Autonomy: A Fading Strategy for Motivational Transition in the Primary English Classroom

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Abstract

This action research examined the role of scaffolding in developing the autonomy of second-grade students at Innova Schools Campus Ecatepec, State of Mexico. The objective was to determine how the implementation and gradual withdrawal of tangible incentives, through a fading strategy, influence the strengthening of autonomy during English language learning. The research followed a qualitative approach, using action-research methodology and drawing on a socio-constructivist framework. The intervention consisted of the progressive application of a fading strategy, designed to gradually reduce tangible incentives in order to favor the transition from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation. At the end of the intervention, a brief survey was administered to gauge students' perceptions of the strategy and to assess its effects. The results showed that the gradual withdrawal of tangible incentives favored the development of autonomy by promoting greater independence in carrying out activities, increasing active classroom participation, and strengthening commitment to English learning. The study concludes that the fading strategy constitutes a relevant pedagogical alternative for fostering autonomy and self-regulation in primary school students.

Keywords: autonomy, scaffolding, fading, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, English language teaching.

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INTRODUCTION

Mediation in the Primary Classroom

In teaching English for the Primary School students, teacher should use the systematic approach or strategy to deliver knowledge and skills to their students and to facilitate learning and engage students in the classroom. In order to provide support that can lead to optimal learning results, teacher should properly choose which techniques, activities, and materials to (Ayuningtyas and Wiyanah, 2023). Teaching English to young learners requires an extraordinary teaching approach that considers their interests and preferences, as young learners tend to do what they like and what they want. In addition, learning motivation plays an important role in encouraging them to be more enthusiastic and actively engaged in the learning process, as it serves as a

driving force for them to participate in learning activities (Rahmawati and Rustipa, 2023). This research implement a Fading Strategy for motivational transition in an English class at primary school. It took place in a second-grade classroom (students aged 8 to 9) at Innova Schools, Campus Ecatepec, State of Mexico. The pedagogical objective is to move from externally regulated motivation toward intrinsic motivation in the English subject, based on the socio-constructivist paradigm.

As a mediation strategy, tangible incentives were implemented (stickers featuring characters such as "Mr. Dino, Strawberry, or Cookie") along with the digital platform ClassDojo. While, from a behaviorist perspective, Skinner (1953) would suggest that positive reinforcement increases the likelihood of a desired behavior, in this study these elements were not used as an end in themselves but as a mediation tool, in the sense proposed by Vygotsky (1978). These resources act as a pedagogical scaffold aimed at reducing the linguistic anxiety of students who initially show insecurity when expressing themselves or carrying out activities in a second language; in addition, these resources foster greater behavioral regulation in the classroom, helping students develop their own executive functions and the capacity to self-regulate naturally.

In addition, gamification elements in digital platform ClassDojo were incorporated, where progress is visualized through the evolution of digital avatars, allowing students to log into the platform to view their progress, while parents can also observe their children's progress. Students do not "earn" points for obeying, but rather record their learning milestones, which strengthens their sense of achievement and encourages sustained participation, turning classroom activities and assignments into a mediated and highly meaningful learning experience. The integration of the game-based digital platform will facilitate students' engagement and interactive learning. The utilization of information technology in education can improve the quality of teaching and enable learners to reflect their interpretation and discovery (Martínez and Arjulayana, 2021).

Research question

Given this pedagogical scenario, the present research is guided by the following question:

How do the implementation and gradual withdrawal of tangible incentives, under a fading strategy, influence the development of autonomy in second-grade primary school students?

To answer this question, the study analyzes the transition from dependence on external incentives (the tangible reward) toward the consolidation of intrinsic motivation, evaluating the impact of the gradual withdrawal of scaffolding on students' self-determination. This scaffolding, understood as the temporary support provided by an external agent (the teacher, a more competent peer, or the design of the task itself), can be seen, according to Allal's (2007) model, as one of the external sources of regulation that sustains students' self-regulation. Indeed, the author states that self-regulation processes are guided and supported by external sources related to the teaching-learning situation, the teacher's intervention, and peer interaction. From this perspective, "pure" self-regulation, separate from context, does not exist: all individual self-regulation is nourished and facilitated by external regulations acting simultaneously at different levels (Allal, 2007). The gradual withdrawal of this scaffolding—that is, the progressive reduction of external regulation—would then be the very condition for a more autonomous self-regulation to emerge and, by extension, a more intrinsic motivation, insofar as students stop depending on the tangible

incentive to sustain their engagement with the task. This view resonates with Perrenoud's (1998) proposal, which, from a more sociological reading of the regulation of learning, holds that formative assessment, as a regulatory tool, is simply one component of differentiated pedagogy.

Problem Statement

The Transition Toward Autonomy

There is a classic debate in pedagogy about whether tangible incentives undermine intrinsic motivation. However, studies such as that of McGinnis, Friman, and Carlyon (1999) suggest that the use of reinforcements, when properly structured, does not necessarily displace interest in the task. This premise supports the intervention: the aim was not to eliminate incentives because they were "harmful" or made students "become dependent," but rather to apply a fading strategy (gradual withdrawal) to ensure that students achieved a healthy transition toward autonomy, guaranteeing that interest in the English subject would be maintained once the reinforcement was withdrawn.

The main challenge lies in moving from extrinsic motivation (centered on reward) toward intrinsic motivation (centered on the value of learning). The problem identified was students' initial dependence on the tangible incentive. In response, a gradual-withdrawal strategy was implemented (known in the pedagogical literature as fading), using "intentional forgetting" as a mechanism to manage this transition without compromising students' emotional security, in line with Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory. The scientific literature has extensively debated the impact of external rewards on students' natural interest. In a comprehensive meta-analysis, Deci, Koestner, and Ryan (1999) examined the accumulated empirical evidence, concluding that, although tangible rewards can affect intrinsic motivation under certain conditions, their impact depends closely on how they are administered and, fundamentally, on how they are withdrawn. The fading strategy aligns with these findings by prioritizing a transition in which reinforcement is not presented as a mechanism of control but as temporary support that, when deliberately withdrawn, helps students internalize the value of the task.

This strategy is likewise linked to reflective and dialogic practices. Incentives were not awarded arbitrarily, but according to agreed-upon criteria (collaborative participation, timely completion, and peer assistance), moving beyond behaviorism to promote formative assessment centered on process (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Based on this background, the present study was conducted to examine the transition from students' initial reliance on tangible incentives toward greater autonomy through the gradual withdrawal of external reinforcement. By implementing a fading strategy, the study seeks to understand how the progressive reduction of external regulation may support the development of self-regulation and more self-determined engagement in English learning. The findings are expected to provide empirical insight into the role of fading as a pedagogical strategy for facilitating the transition from externally regulated engagement toward greater autonomy in young learners.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research was carried out using an action-research approach, a methodology that allows the teacher-researcher to analyze, reflect on, and transform their own pedagogical practice (Elliot, 1993). The study was conducted over one school cycle with

a group of 30 second-grade students (ages 8 to 9) at Innova Schools, Campus Ecatepec, Mexico State.

Procedure and study phases:

Diagnostic phase: Identification of dependence on tangible incentives as an initial scaffold, grounded in the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). From this perspective, learning is a process mediated by tools and social signs. Under this model, the use of the ClassDojo platform and the digital point record becomes a semiotic instrument that allows students to visualize their own learning path; it holds that the student moves from being a passive recipient of a stimulus to an agent who uses technology to structure their own metacognition. It also helps that students feel motivated and active, fostering the knowledge into meaningful learning in a positive environment.

Intervention phase (fading strategy): Implementation of the gradual withdrawal of reinforcement over a period of a term and a half through "intentional forgetting" and the progressive spacing of ClassDojo use. In fact, use of the platform was not constant but occurred at the end of each unit, which promoted the transition toward autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Students collaborate in building their own kind of facilities and playing in teams, changing their avatar monster. They also can send small phrases like greeting in English; each one decides what do in the digital platform

Recording phase: Use of participant observation (Taylor & Bogdan, 1987) through field logs to document reactions to the absence of stimuli and the evolution of spontaneous participation. As a complement, a closing survey was administered to gather students' perceptions of achieving learning objectives independently and their level of acceptance of the English subject. Of the 30 students in the group, 22 completed the survey (those present on the day of application who finished the instrument), so the percentages reported in the results section are calculated based on this subgroup.

This method made it possible to systematize the pedagogical transition, confirming that the deliberate withdrawal of external supports is essential for consolidating self-regulation in students.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

From Reward to Learning

The process of gradually withdrawing the scaffolding was not random; it was based on the Gradual Release of responsibility model of Pearson and Gallagher (1983). This model proposes a transition in which responsibility for learning shifts from the teacher (who models and supports) to the student (who assumes full control). Applying this logic to the management of incentives in the classroom allowed students to move from "reward-guided" participation to "autonomous performance," ensuring that the transition was pedagogically responsible rather than abrupt.

Analysis of the information gathered in the observation logs and in the survey administered at the close of the intervention, answered by 22 of the 30 students in the group, revealed telling results: 86% of respondents expressed acceptance of and enjoyment in English activities, while 68% reported having achieved the learning objectives independently.

Table 1. Results of the closing survey (n = 22)

Performance Indicator	Result Achieved
Acceptance of and enjoyment in the English class	86%
Perception of autonomous achievement of learning objectives	68%

What is most valuable about this data is not just the percentage, but what happened in the classroom during the process. At first, the absence of the sticker generated a bit of uncertainty in the children: "Miss, didn't you bring the participation stickers?" Questions like "Aren't we using them anymore?" However, as the weeks of the fading phase progressed, this question gradually disappeared. What this was interpreted to mean, in line with Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory, is that students began to experience a growing sense of competence. They no longer needed the "prize" because the satisfaction of having managed to say a sentence or complete an activity on their own became, in itself, the reward and to observe how the students become more independent and participative while being praised is satisfactory.

Likewise, when contrasting these observations with Skinner's (1953) view of positive reinforcement, something interesting emerged: the strategy did not cause the "extinction" of motivation, as some strict behaviorists might have feared. On the contrary, as the scaffold was gradually withdrawn, participation behavior was not lost; it was transformed. Students began to actively seek help from their peers, moving toward a more mature zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Learning through play became the driving force, and peer interaction replaced the need for external approval. Students found they felt comfortable with their peers and learning to lose the fear or shame to ask for help and working in a collaborative way.

In conclusion, this 68% rate of self-perceived academic achievement, reached under a methodology oriented toward autonomy, demonstrates that the teacher's role is key in knowing when to step back and allow students to take ownership of their own learning process.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this action research, it has become clear that the teacher's goal goes beyond the simple transmission of knowledge; it consists of designing the precise conditions for students to take charge of their own learning. The transition from extrinsic motivation based on tangible incentives to intrinsic motivation is a complex process that requires, above all, deliberate observation and patient mediation.

The results obtained 86% acceptance within the group and 68% perception of autonomous academic achievement show that the gradual withdrawal of scaffolding did not extinguish participation but transformed it into a more mature form of self-regulation. The fading strategy allowed students to build the emotional security needed to face new challenges without fear of failure.

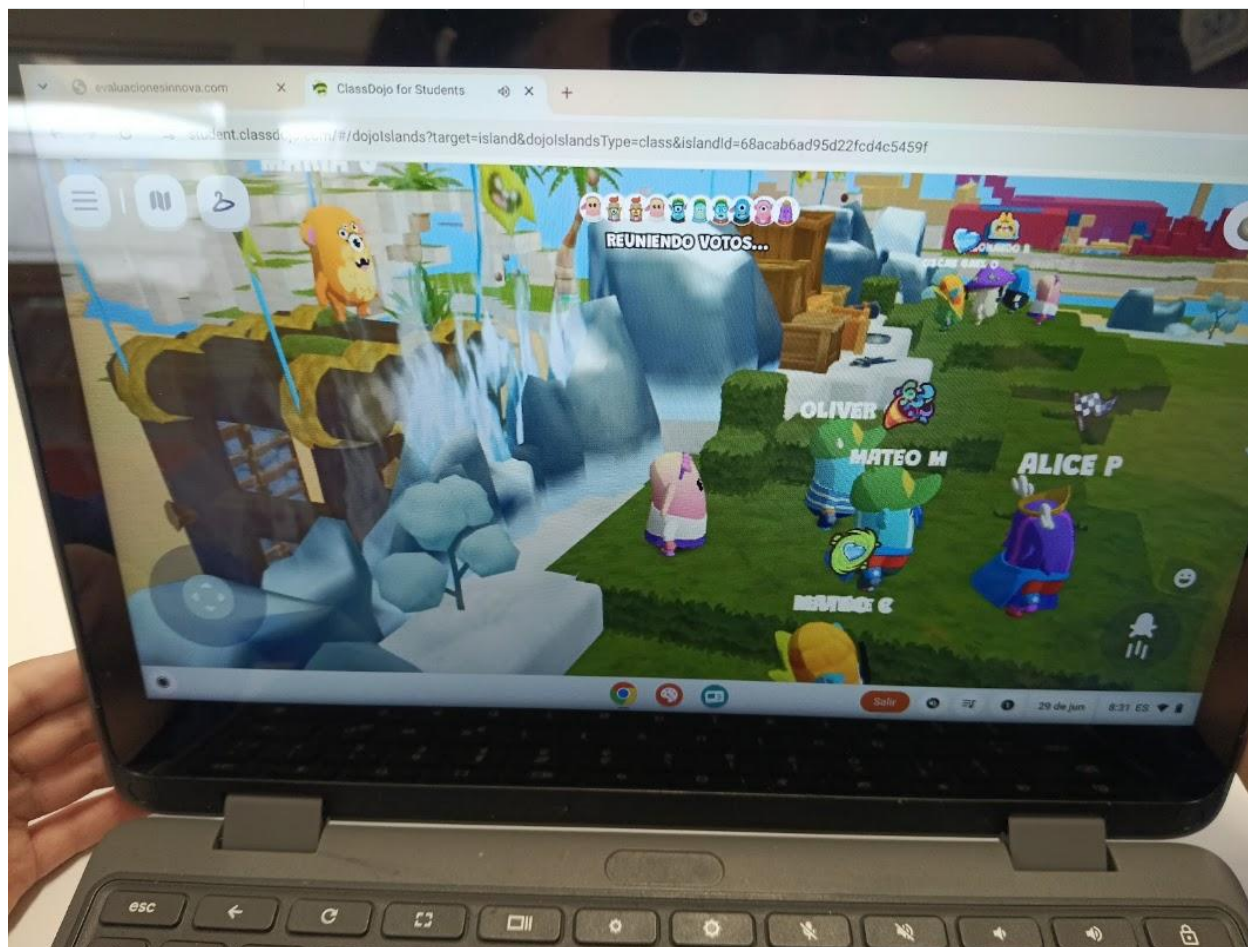
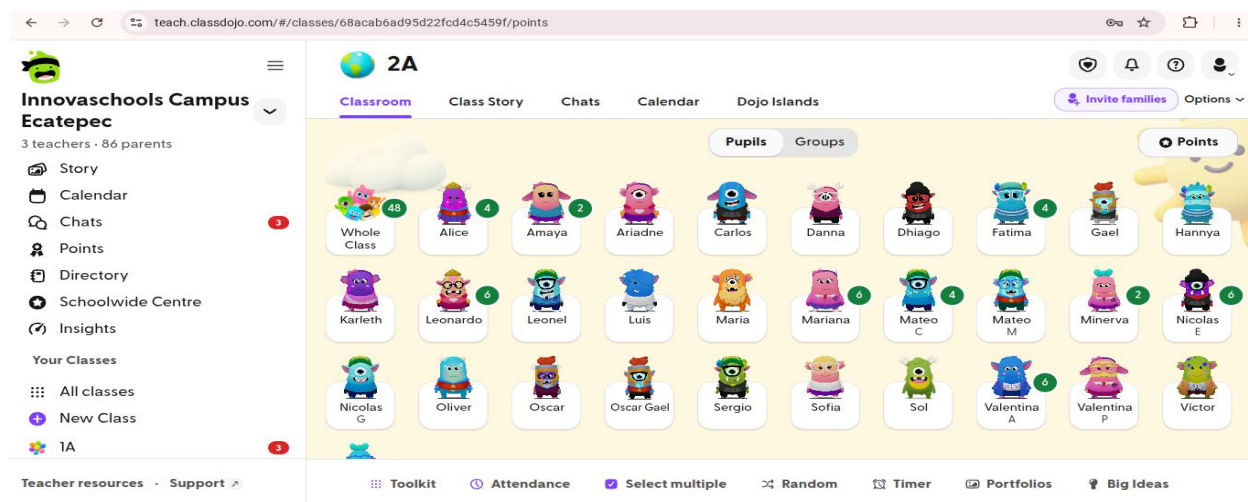
Ultimately, this pedagogical experience confirms that success in learning English does not depend on external stimuli but rather on students' ability to recognize the value of the process. Our task as teachers is to accompany them with clear tools, making sure to withdraw external support at just the right time so that students are finally able to walk on their own in the discovery of a new language.

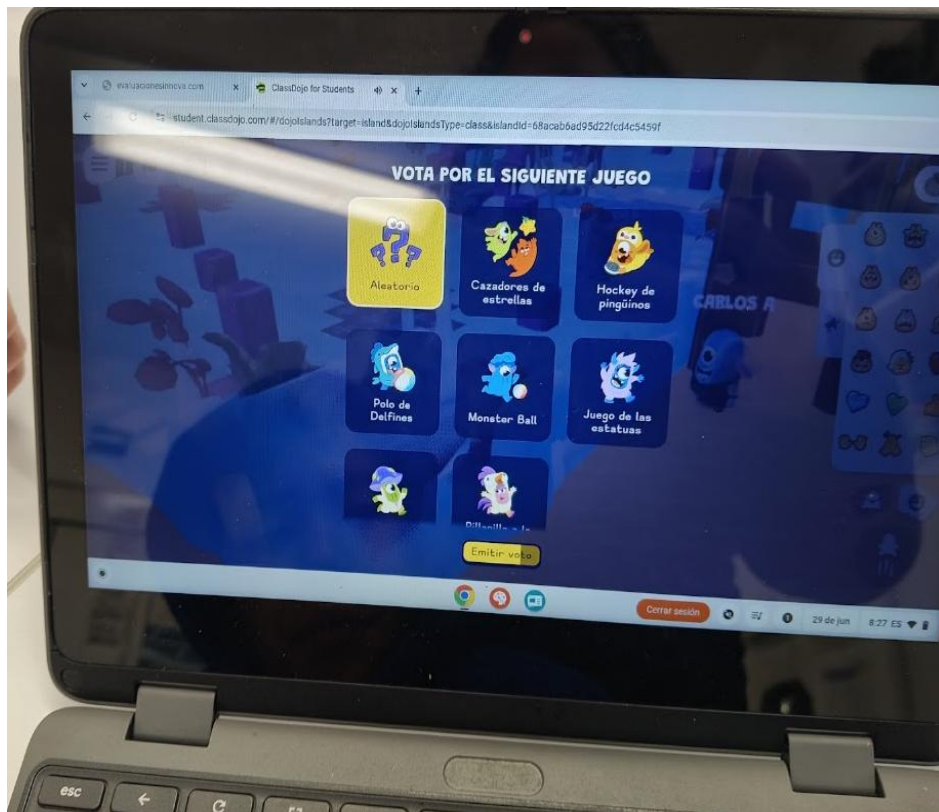
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Appendices

ClassDojo (avatars)





Tangible stickers



Survey

Encuesta: Mi Clase de Inglés

Nombre: H.B.B.S.

Grado: 2º A

Fecha: _____

😊 Bloque 1: ¿Cómo me siento en mi clase de inglés?

Instrucciones:

Marca la carita que mejor muestra cómo te sientes.

1. ¿Te gusta venir a tus clases de inglés?

☒ 😊 Mucho ☐ 😐 Más o menos ☐ 😞 Poco

¿Por qué? (Me gusta porque...)

quiero hablar inglés y por que me gusta hablar inglés

2. ¿Te sientes feliz cuando participas hablando en inglés?

☐ 😊 Muy feliz ☒ 😊 Bien ☐ 😞 Me da un poco de pena

¿Qué es lo que más te gusta de participar? (Me gusta porque...)

me gusta comunicarme en inglés con alguien más

3. Cuando trabajamos en equipo, ¿te sientes parte de un grupo unido?

☒ 😊 Sí, mucho ☐ 😐 A veces ☐ 😞 No mucho

¿Por qué? (Nos sentimos unidos cuando...)

trabajo en equipo

🎮 Bloque 2: ¿Cómo aprendemos jugando?

1. ¿Qué es lo que más te ayuda a trabajar bien con tus compañeros?

Marca una respuesta.

☐ Ganar puntos para el equipo.

☒ Ayudarnos cuando alguien no sabe qué hacer.

1. Escucha las ideas de los demás.

2. Usa el vocabulario que aprendimos.

2. Cuando recibo una Cookie, Mr. Dino o un avocado me siento feliz porque...

porque es divertido

3. ¿Cómo te sientes cuando logras terminar una actividad con tu equipo?

☐ 😊 Muy feliz ☒ 😊 Bien ☐ 😞 Aburrido

¿Qué fue lo que más disfrutaste de trabajar juntos? (Disfruté porque...)

porque me gusta participar

4. Cuando jugamos en la plataforma, ¿qué aprendes de tus compañeros?

Aprendo a... construir

👥 Bloque 3: ¿Cómo trabajamos en equipo?

1. Cuando trabajamos con roles (líder, secretario, etc.), ¿qué te ayuda a terminar la actividad?

☐ Que todos hablen inglés.

☐ Que cada quien haga su parte.

☒ Ayudar a los demás.

2. ¿Cómo te sientes cuando revisas tu checklist al final de la actividad?

☐ 😊 Feliz porque lo logramos

☒ 😐 Pensativo porque faltó algo

☐ 😞 Preocupado

Cuando falta algo, ¿qué haces con tu equipo? (Nosotros...)

les puedo decir

3. ¿Qué es lo que más te gusta de trabajar en equipo en la clase de inglés?

ayudarlos como a decir lo que se confía

4. Si pudieras dar una idea para que las clases de inglés fueran aún más divertidas, ¿cuál sería?

nada todo es divertido

Mi opinión final

Dibuja una carita que muestre cómo te sientes en tu clase de inglés:

😊 😐 😞

Lo que más me gusta de mi clase de inglés es:

que me divierto aprendiendo inglés

Algo que me gustaría hacer más en clase es:

jugar

¡Gracias por compartir tus ideas! 🌟 ❤️